NATURE STUDY READER
PART I

REV. J. C. ATKINSON

WALKS, TALKS, TRAVELS & EXPLOITS OF TWO SCHOOLBOYS

University of Liverpool

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BEING

WALKS, TALKS, TRAVELS AND EXPLOITS
OF TWO SCHOOLBOYS

FACULTY OF ARTS
LIVERPOOL

Jack after the Starling's Nest.—p. 103 *Frontispiece*

NATURE STUDY READER

BEING

WALKS, TALKS, TRAVELS, & EXPLOITS OF TWO SCHOOLBOYS

BY

THE REV. J. C. ATKINSON

CANON OF YORK AND INCUMBENT OF DANBY
AUTHOR OF 'PLAYHOURS AND HALF-HOLIDAYS,' 'FORTY YEARS IN A MOORLAND PARISH,' ETC.

PART I

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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

The author of the following pages feels that something in the shape of an explanation at least, if not an apology, may justly be expected from him for the apparent presumption of reproducing a book which was written for, and addressed to, the 'Schoolboy Public' of no less than thirty-three years ago. His apology must be, not that the book met with an even flattering reception from the beginning, but that now, for several years past, correspondents new and old, and from many parts of the kingdom, who were boys themselves when the book first appeared, and who now have boys of their own, have inquired of him once and again as to his willingness to reproduce both the present volume and its sequel (*Playhours and Half-Holidays*), and perhaps the most grateful response he could make is that which is offered by the re-issue of the volumes in question.

Danby, 8*th February* 1892.

CONTENTS

PART I

CHAPTER I.

Elmdon School – Dr. Tickletail—Dr. Noble—Jack Edwards · Holiday Rambles—School Traditions—The Ghost—Cricket—Returning to quarters . . . . . pp. 1—12

CHAPTER II.

At Elmdon still—Docwra's Mill—The Bridge—A Plucky Rat—Old Exploits—Bob's Narrative—Leaving Elmdon . . 13—18

CHAPTER III.

Walk the First—Loach Hunt—Partridge Nest—The Warren—Snipe's Nest—Pewits and Eggs—Hagley Beacon—The Mere—Ducks and Nest—Coots, Waterhens, and Dabchicks . 19—40

CHAPTER IV.

Walk the Second — Robert Banks — Dabchicks, Coots, Waterhens, Reed-warblers, their Nests and Eggs . . . 41—62

CHAPTER V.

Walk the Third—Eel-hooks—Setting Lines—Kingfisher's Nest—Dipper and Nest — Wilson's Filmy Fern — Eel, Perch, and Trout caught . . . . . 63—88

CHAPTER VI.

Walk the Fourth — The Grove — The Hart-stone—The Raven Tree—Wrilton Castle—Goldcrest's Nest—The Lake—Crow's Nest . . . . . pp. 89—114

CHAPTER VII.

School Examination—Walk the Fifth—Merlin's Eggs—Golden Plover's Nest—Stonechat's, Whinchat's, Common and Mountain Linnets' Nests—Cornerake's, Whitethroat's, Longtailed Tomtit's, and Willow Wren's Nests . . . . . 115—135

CHAPTER VIII.

Walk the Sixth—Sandpiper's and Magpie's Nests—Bush Magpie and Tree Magpie — Nests of the Nuthatch, Ringdove, Woodcock, Stockdove, and Spotted Woodpecker . . 136—159

CHAPTER IX.

Walk the Sixth continued—Pheasant Breeding—The Badger—The White-tailed Eagle—Capture of another Badger, 160—182

CHAPTER X.

Visit to Sir Cuthbert — The Fowl on the Lake — Sollington Heronry and Abbey—The Buck-stone—Fly-Rods—Crossbill's Nest—Return to Elmdon . . . . . 183—208

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PART I

JACK AFTER THE STARLING'S NEST . . . *Frontispiece*

PAGE

BAGGING THE BADGER 170

CATCHING THE EAGLE 177

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

Elmdon School—Dr. Tickletail—Dr. Noble—Jack Edwards—Holiday Rambles—School Traditions—The Ghost—Cricket—Returning to Quarters.

What a nice old town Elmdon was! I was at school there: that was in old Dr. Tickletail's time. How well I remember the Doctor, with his rusty gown that had been black once, and his spectacles that would not sit straight across his nose, but rode like a butcher-boy, all down on one side; and his cane, which used to come flying across the school, and had to be carried back to its owner by the boy that was going to try its taste; and his finger jingling time with the key of his desk as he sang—for he didn't read—the odes of Horace. And I haven't forgotten the coaches, twelve "up" and twelve "down" every day; and how they were covered, as well as filled, inside and out, with

turkeys and hares, and pheasants and partridges, just the last days before the Christmas holidays begun; and the huge flocks of geese which used to go cackling and waddling along the road about Michaelmas, with their gozzards (goose-herds) to drive them and take care of them in their slow, tiresome, tedious journey up to London to be eaten there. But all this is many years ago. It is more than twenty years since the good old Doctor flung his cane for the last time, and was laid in the quiet churchyard, near the little door through which he saw his boys pass into the church, Sunday after Sunday, for so long. The coaches are forgotten as well as the Doctor; the Christmas turkeys and game go up in the luggage van, and the geese in sheep trucks, tier above tier; and when the holidays come, the boys race down to the station, not far from the river at the bottom of the town, instead of being taken up at the school by the "Blue," or the "Wellington," or the "Telegraph."

I left long before the railway came, and how strange it seemed to me, when, having to go to Elmdon again after several years, on coming out from a cutting I found myself passing just below the dear old churchyard, and the great old elms that surrounded it to the south. How well I remembered them, and the scrape I got into when

the parson's man caught me one morning cutting notches and driving nails in the huge twisting stalks of ivy that clothed those elm-tree trunks—for I was trying to get gum-ivy, which an old fishing book I had said was a famous thing to anoint the baits with and make the fish bite; only it never made any difference that I could find out.

The reason of my going back to Elmdon was this. I had been paying a visit to my old school-fellow and friend, Harry Benson. We of course got talking about old school scenes, and exploits, and scrapes, and it made me very desirous to see the old place once more; and so when he went on to talk of his younger son, Bob, who was now at school there, and how well he was doing, and what a good master and worthy successor to our old Doctor the present head-master, Doctor Noble, was, I determined that on my way home from London—whither I had to go after leaving Harry Benson's—I would go round by Elmdon and make a visit to Bob, (who was my god-son, and whom I had not seen since he was promoted to jacket and trousers,) the excuse for doing so.

Well, the 2.30 train was not more than five minutes late, and almost before I had time to turn round on the platform, two lads came up to me, and the shorter of the two spoke to me at

once, saying, "I am sure you must be Mr. Spencer."

I couldn't help smiling, and replied, "Why, what makes you think so?"

"Oh! because they told me——"

"They told you," interrupted I; "who told you?"

"Why, in a letter I got from home yesterday morning, they said I was to look for a gentleman that wanted shaving, and I am sure *you* want it, sir. And besides, I think——"

But here he paused, looking up into my face with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well," I said, after a moment or two waiting for him to go on, "and what do you think besides?"

"Why, that you look like a 'brick,' and papa always says you *are* a brick and no mistake."

As I happened to have a beard that would have been a small fortune to a sofa-stuffer, and did not feel inclined to disclaim looking like "a brick," whatever that might imply, I acknowledged that I was Mr. Spencer, and shook hands very heartily with Master Bob.

"And who is your friend?" I said to him, after having sent forward my luggage to the "Angel," where I was going to stop, and beginning to walk in the same direction myself.

"Oh! that's my cousin Jack, sir—Jack Edwards. We are in the same form, and sleep next beds to each other, and are great friends. He's a capital good fellow—ain't you, Jack?"

"Well, I'm not up to half as many things as you are, Bob; but still I don't want to be a muff."

As we walked on, after leaving the station, plenty of information was given me as to school politics, and parties, and progress. I soon knew that Gibson was first boy, and that Donaldson, who as second boy had pushed him hard, had been unlucky enough, in an unthinking moment, to construe *fœminis bobus* in his "Tacitus" by "female bulls," and was nicknamed accordingly on the instant, of course; how the feud between "the boys" and "Fuller's boys" was as fierce as ever; how the latter taunted the others with being "bone-pickers," from the alleged stinginess of the school dinners; how, the morning but one before, some fourteen or fifteen of Fuller's school had set on four or five of their opponents, when out for their morning run on the London road, and would have thrashed them terribly but for the opportune arrival of half a dozen of the fifth form, who had turned the tables; so that "the boys"—though still inferior in numbers—had succeeded in putting their assailants to flight, and drubbed three or four of them to their heart's content. All this and

much more I listened to as we walked up the long street that terminated in the open space before the old schoolhouse.

Just as we turned off to the left to go to my inn, instead of advancing straight on to the great gate of the school-yard, we met a tall, dark, good-looking man, apparently about fifty years old, who was on the instant most respectfully "capped" by my two young companions. He nodded kindly to them, and said as he passed, "You've met with your friend then. You have till five o'clock. Don't be late."

This was Dr. Noble, and from the glance I had at his countenance, and the kindliness of his smile and manner to the lads, I was not surprised to hear how highly and warmly they spoke of him. "There wasn't anything he couldn't do. He had been the best bowler in his 'eleven' when he was a young man, and he would sometimes take up a bat now when the school side was practising, and even Pettit, who was five feet eleven in his stockings, and could throw a cricket-ball ninety-five yards, and hit harder 'swipes' than any other of the boys, couldn't play as the Doctor did. And then he could fish, and shoot, and ride, and row, and they knew he had caught five salmon one day the very last holidays, and they didn't know how many trout another day, when he was

up in Scotland. And he was such a scholar too, and took such interest in the boys that tried to do well. And they believed there wasn't a bird or a beast, or hardly an insect, but he knew all about them; and he was so kind, if he saw any of the boys taking a pleasure in Natural History, he helped them all he could, and told them they might go and ask him any questions they liked, one particular day every week."

"Do *you* ever ask him anything?" I said.

"I should think we do, just," was Master Bob's reply. "Why, this was our day for being out, only you were coming, and so we went to the station instead. Almost every Thursday, if it's fine, we get such glorious rambles in the country. We have from twelve to five, and sometimes six, and all we have to do is, to ask Dr. Noble leave to go here or there, as we want. And then, when we come back, if he happens to see us, as he often does, he generally asks us where we have been, and what we have seen, and explains anything we ask him about, and perhaps lets us look at some of his books, which have got just what we want to know in them. Sometimes, too, he takes some of us out with him, when he goes out for anything in particular, such as a plant or an insect. And it's so jolly to go with him, over hedge and ditch, across the moors, over

the brooks by narrow planks or a jump, and then to be set to look for what he wants, and told how to know it if we see it. 'Tisn't often though, he gets time to get out like that. I know I wish he could go twice as often; and I'm sure he likes it as much as we do, and chaffs us like fun if we lag behind, or are afraid of the thorns, or get into a bog, or jump into a ditch instead of over it; or anything like that."

I found that the Doctor's merits and qualifications were a subject of unfailing interest to my young companions, and I had many little instances of his goodness and wisdom, as well as skill in manly exercises, related to me. Indeed, the first half-hour of our walk, after I had seen about my room and dinner at the "Angel," was almost entirely taken up by the two lads in talking about their master; and it was not till I had asked two or three questions about other matters, that they began to talk freely of the things which are usually most interesting to schoolboys. I then heard that "the ghost" still paid its nocturnal visits, and it was clear enough to me that, though they affected to make light of it, they were much more awed than they liked to acknowledge. So I told them my own recollections. I, in my time—as they were doing now—slept in the "long attic," and, night after night, soon

after we had got to bed, the mysterious and—as all the boys thought and felt—awful knocking began. One evening, I told them, old Dr. Tickletail left orders that he should be called the moment the noises began. One of the boys, therefore, who was, indeed, almost a man grown, did not undress. About nine o'clock, the first sounds —for which we were all listening so intently we could hear our hearts beat—were heard; the steady, low beat, beat, beat, as of something softer than one's fist against a door or wainscoting. Rice instantly crept noiselessly down to the Doctor, and in a few minutes up he came, with poker in his hand; behind him the second master, with a long pistol in his; then the English master, then the Doctor's man with a lantern, and last of all Rice himself. The procession went noiselessly through the long attic, and in through a small door at the further end of it, into a long, narrow, low passage, which ran down the whole length of the two rooms known as the "long attic" and the "short attic," just at our bed-heads. We heard their steps, tramp, tramp, along behind us, and were in agonies of expectation. Not a whisper, not a breath was heard among all the twenty boys there. But no pistol was fired; no scuffle was heard. The low beat we had heard every night for weeks, and which continued almost up to the

moment they entered the dark passage, was stilled, and in a few minutes all returned.

They had searched everywhere, the Doctor said, but nothing was to be seen. No means of entry existed, save through the little door they had gone in at, and the corresponding one on to the leads, which was quite secure. There was not a brick loose, nor a hole in the plaster. The noise, therefore, we had heard so often, and which had frightened us so much, was probably made by rats, which, it was well known, often did contrive to make extraordinary noises. It could not be made by a human creature, and of course we were not so foolish as to suppose it could be made by anything of a supernatural character.

And so the Doctor left us;—of course, more uneasy and restless than before, particularly as he had scarcely been gone two minutes, before the strange, slow knocking began again. I hardly knew how we got to sleep that night; but I recollect well that we heard "the ghost"—as we all had now got to call it—every night, for weeks together, that year and other years after it. I told them I had been down the passage myself—for I didn't like feeling myself a coward about it—and alone, the year I left school; but could not find anything to add to, or take from the report which the Doctor made that memorable

night. What it was, I could not say. It might be rats; but I did not believe so. I knew it was none of my schoolfellows; and, in one word, it was altogether unaccountable. They, too, were convinced that the sounds, which they described as exactly the same, and recurring at the same time, and with the same intermissions as were still so fresh in my recollection, did not proceed from any of the boys. All alike were much too uneasy for that; and, as for rats, how could they make such noises? The two lads, however, were not quite so confident as myself that there was some natural explanation for the sounds, if only it could be found out. It was to them clearly "the ghost."

From "the ghost" they got to cricket, and I had a full, true, and particular account of the match between the Elmdon-School Eleven and the Sunbury boys, and how the latter had had the great advantage of getting many a hint, and some teaching, from the old professional player, Samuel Balls, who now lived in Sunbury; how, notwithstanding that, our Eleven had beat the Sunbury Eleven with six wickets to go down; mainly through Pettit's slashing hits and Ned Hayward's slow bowling, which the Doctor had told him to try, from having seen Balls play years before, and thinking that, most likely, the Sunbury lads would

be used to what everybody knew was his favourite style of bowling. So wrapped up were my companions in their account of the match, and the exciting incidents in it, that I had to remind them of the Doctor's caution "not to be late." It wanted but ten minutes to five, and they had a long half-mile to go. So, briefly settling with them that they were to come to me again in the evening, as soon as they were at liberty, if Dr. Noble would allow them, I walked on to the "Angel" at a more leisurely pace than that adopted by Bob and his cousin.

CHAPTER II.

At Elmdon still—Docwra's Mill—The Bridge—A Plucky Rat—Old Exploits—Bob's Narrative—Leaving Elmdon.

About half-past seven, I saw my young friends crossing the square from the school-gates to the inn, and a few seconds after, Bob's sharp rap at my door announced their readiness to obey my bidding to "Come in." Finding they had more than an hour good, we strolled off in the direction of the river. It was a calm, fair summer evening, with a few small light clouds hung in the sky, those in the west tinged with rose-colour and orange, deepening in hue as the sun neared the horizon. The old mill,—Docwra's mill,—still stood where it used. I almost expected to see the sturdy old Quaker miller cross from the house to the mill, as if the last twenty-five years had not been. There was the mill-tail, and there the back-water, and here the sluice-gates that the young eels used to surmount in so won-

derful a way; the first climbers often drying up and remaining fixed to the wood by their own slime, and so making an easier pathway for their successors: there again, the favourite haunt of the gudgeon shoals; and there—where the back-water comes into the main stream again—the place where I had caught those four grand perch. We moved slowly on towards the bridge, and then, crossing over by it, we turned on to the Whaldon-road, simply, I believe, because it lay for some distance along the bank of the stream. The leap of some fish after a fly, the crossing of a water-rat, the croak of the water-hen a little lower down the river, the rapid flight and dip of the swallow, all were full of interest to the two boys as well as myself; and many times as they had noticed these things before, still both had as much quiet pleasure at their recurrence as if—nay more than as if—each had newly occurred for the first time. They seemed to invest each actor in this natural scene with a sort of quaint, familiar personality. "Look there," said Bob, "there's a big chub by that bush. I know him. He broke Watson's line one day, and he came and looked at a grasshopper I put on my hook the day before yesterday, and then gave a lazy wallop with his tail, which said as plain as talking, 'Wouldn't you like me to gobble it down?

But old chub aren't caught with hooks with an inch of shank to 'em showing.' And away he went. But he'll have that yellow moth as sure as a gun. There! I said so"—as the poor moth, fluttering out of the bush, just touched the water and was sucked in in an instant. "That's the water-rat," he whispered a minute or two after, "which old Beasley shot at six times with his pocket pistol; and he might have shot sixteen times, only the gamekeeper came up, hearing the shots, and frightened Mr. Rat by speaking. I know him by his black fur. Listen to that water-hen; she has lost two of the little black puff-balls that she calls young ones, and she's half calling them, and half screaming about it. Croak again, old lady. I saw the wicked old pike catch down one of them."

"Why," I said, "you seem to have a speaking acquaintance with half the fish, fowl, and four-footed beasts in the neighbourhood, Bob. Do they know you as well?"

"No," he replied, "I wish they did; specially that old chub and the pike. But I do like to take notice of fishes and birds and other living creatures; and I do so enjoy a walk like this by the river side, or a good ramble over the hills, and on to the moor, and through the woods. I always see something new every time, and the

more I see, I think the more I like it, and the more I want to see and know."

"I am sure it is so with me," said Edwards, or Jack, as his cousin usually called him, and who did not talk half so readily and willingly as Bob did. "I had no idea what pleasure one might have in a walk till I came here, and Bob and I got to be 'thick,' and liked to be together as much as we could. I never knew anything about all these things till I saw Bob taking notice of everything, and making the notice he took useful to him in many ways, such as finding nests, and catching fish, and getting baits, and lots of other things. I used to be quite puzzled at first, to know how he knew things, or found them out. But now," he added, "I begin to know a little more than I used, and every new walk I get with Bob, or especially with the Doctor, I get hold of something fresh."

Much pleased with my young friends, I asked them several questions about the neighbouring country, and about many of the old scenes which had been familiar to me in my own school days, and which were deeply impressed on my memory in connexion with some schoolboy incident or exploit,—some birds-nesting, or nutting, or fishing expedition. In this way I had little narratives of what they had seen, one day, in a particular part of the moor; another day in Turley

Wood; a third day, at the confluence of the little Whitwater with the larger stream into which it poured itself a few miles below Elmdon. And I became so interested in their accounts, that at last, I fairly became boy enough to ask for an account of one of their expeditions—to which frequent reference had been made—beginning with their start off from the school, down to their return late in the afternoon. Bob straightway began—for he was the chief speaker throughout, and his cousin seldom did more than correct his inaccuracies, if he showed any, or confirm his recollection, when appealed to by him for that purpose. The little narrative I thus listened to as we returned towards the school, seemed to me so interesting, that after the lads left me for the night, I made notes of it, with the intention of writing it out at length, and as nearly in the words of my godson and his friend as I could, as soon as time and opportunity would permit me. During the next day and part of the third, I saw as much of my young friends as their school duties would permit, and more than one similar account of a walk did I listen to, all of which I took early opportunities of writing out fairly for the benefit of some young friends I was much interested in at home, and who seemed, a few days after, to listen with great delight as I pro-

ceeded to read to them what I had written. Before leaving Elmdon, I fixed that Bob and his cousin were to come over, if their several fathers would allow them, to my house, and spend at least a week of their holidays with me, and see what, in the way of novelty and interest, the country in which I lived, and to which they had never yet paid a visit, would be able to present to them. I then shook hands with them, and taking my place in the train, was soon hurried off, leaving them apparently as much pleased with their new acquaintance as I was with mine.

CHAPTER III.

Walk the First—Loach Hunt—Partridge's Nest—The Warren—Snipe's Nest—Pewits and Eggs—Hagley Beacon—The Mere—Ducks and Nest—Coots, Waterhens, and Dabchicks.

The first walk of which Bob gave me an account was described to me much in the following terms:

"We had had our monthly collections," said Bob, "and had worked hard to do the best we could, and were very glad to get out with a whole afternoon before us, and the day everything we could wish for a jolly long ramble. We knew we had done to the Doctor's satisfaction, for we had seen him nod and smile two or three times when we had given answers that pleased him, or construed a tough bit, and showed we remembered something he had told us when it came over in regular lessons. So we did not mind a bit going up to him as soon as he came out of the school, and asking him to give us leave to go off for the afternoon. He gave his permission almost before we had asked, with the inquiry, 'Where are you going?' We told him we were thinking of getting

up as far as Hagley Common, and home round by the Fox-Spinney."

"A very nice walk," said he; "I wish I could take it myself."

So we got a good lunch of bread and cheese, and started off without delay. Well, you know, we were soon over the bridge, and turned off up Watery Lane. Jack had never seen a stone loach then, and so I thought I would show him one. "Jack," I said to him, "I'm going to catch a fish."

"Why, you've no rod, nor even a line or hook with you; what's the use of pretending you are going to fish?" was Jack's reply.

However, Bob just turned his sleeves up, and began to turn the stones over that lay in the shallow running water which gave its name to the lane they were going along. Four stones, five, six were turned up, but with no result. Jack thought Bob was losing time and shortening their walk for nothing. However, the next moment he saw something dart from under the stone Bob had just moved, and, making a little wake in the shallow water, swim straight to another stone, and wriggle itself underneath it. His curiosity was now excited, and he jumped eagerly from the dry bank he was standing on into the wet lane beside Bob, rather splashing him as he did so.

"Keep back, you clumsy Cockney," cried Bob,

"and don't come and show you are as awkward with your hands as you are with your feet, and frighten my fish before I can catch it."

Jack, who knew Bob's rough, good-tempered way, only laughed at being called "a clumsy Cockney," and stood still as he was bid. Bob proceeded to examine the position of the fish under the fresh stone. He saw there was a little accumulation of sand at the side of the stone opposite to that at which the loach had gone under it, so that the little fish could not work its way out behind, unless he lifted the stone quite up; so he tried to turn it up as if he were opening a box lid, very slowly and gently. As he lifted it in front the fish tried to get more under it at the back, until at last Bob saw his time was come, and put his finger and thumb very cannily in and caught his loach. Jack was extremely interested at the capture, and at the manœuvres which had led to it, and examined the little fish closely.

"Why it has no scales," he said, "and its tail is much more like an eel's tail than the tail of a fish. And look at those things hanging down from its mouth; whatever are they for?"

Bob could not explain the use of that odd-looking appendage, but he told his companion several other fish had something of the same sort. He then put the little fish back into the water, before

Jack had "half satisfied his curiosity," he said. So Bob told him to try and catch one for himself, which, after two or three failures, and a very exciting chase from stone to stone, he at last succeeded in doing. The loach now caught was quite a large one, being nearly or quite four inches long; and Jack examined its pale brown sides and eel-like tail with much delight; soon, however, returning it to the water, and going on after Bob, who was already some distance in advance.

"I say, old fellow, did you ever see a stickleback?" was his salutation as Jack came up with him.

"No," said Jack, "I never did; what's it like?"

"Well, next time we go out I know a ditch that is half full of 'em; and aren't they beautiful fellows just now? at least some of 'em; their bellies all gold, and blue, and violet, and green."

He added several particulars as to their habits and history which Jack thought very strange, and he wasn't quite sure Bob wasn't "chaffing" him when he said that their bright colours left any of them that happened to get licked in a battle with a brother stickleback.

Having proceeded about half a mile along Watery Lane, which, however, had ceased to deserve its name from the time they turned a sharp

corner in it, and began to ascend a slight hill, they turned off along a footpath across several fields. In one of these fields the path ran close along the hedge for some distance, the brushwood of which grew out of a thick bank. Bob's sharp eye detected the twinkle of a much smaller and darker eye than his own, behind a small decayed stub: a second glance told him it belonged to a partridge, though the plumage of the bird resembled the adjoining objects so much in colour, that it was by no means easy to detect her as she sat. Bob drew back a step or two to join Jack, who was a little behind him, and said,

"Here's a partridge on her nest, old fellow. Come and look at her. Gently now."

So Jack went on very gingerly, and with his eye followed the direction of Bob's finger, but saw nothing. In vain he looked, peering about, until at last, the partridge, disliking the continued loitering and peeping of the lads so near her, slipped off her nest, and, with a great whirr—making Jack's heart thump with its suddenness—flew off. Then the lads saw she was covering only five eggs.

"She has more to lay," said Bob; "that's what she was after now. She'll come back as soon as we have gone, lay her egg, cover her nest up, with those old oak leaves I dare say, and then

be off to her business or pleasure with her mate all the rest of the day."

"Poor creature," said Jack, after a few seconds of silence, as they walked on; "it is a pity she should have so much trouble for nothing."

"For nothing?" cried Bob; "what do you mean?"

"Why, that her nest being so close to the foot-path, it is sure to be found. If nobody else found it, the first dog that goes by when she's there will scent it out, and then good-bye to her eggs."

"Oh! never fear," was Bob's reply; "nineteen people out of twenty would never think of looking for a nest there, and *you* know if it would be easy for the twentieth to find it."

"Ah! yes," answered Jack, "but then the dogs."

"I tell you what, Jack, it is a very queer thing, and I don't know how to make it out; dogs never do find a sitting partridge. I have known pointers even, and setters go close by partridges sitting on their nests, every day almost, and never take any notice of them. Why, last year there was a nest on the bank just opposite our gate at home; and old Don and Sancho, as they ran out when my father took them out for exercise, almost poked their noses on to her sometimes, but she sat quite still, and they never suspected a par-

tridge was near them. My father said he had known lots of such cases. It's very funny; I don't know, but he says it's because they don't give out any scent when they sit so still for a long time together."

They had now reached the fields which bordered on the common. The common was separated from the enclosures by a kind of turfen wall, nearly four feet high, and surmounted by furze bushes placed all along it, and kept in their place by the weight of sods laid firmly on, and also by long pegs. Bob went straight to a sort of stile, which resembled two short, broadish ladders, with their lower ends stuck into the ground on either side the wall, and their upper ends secured together above the wall, with a sort of projecting end to hold by when getting over.

"What an odd stile!" thought Jack; "why isn't there one like those in the fields? And where's the gate?" Questioning Bob about these matters, that young gentleman, for answer, bade him "use his eyes."

"Why, so I have, and I can't see a gate, though there must be a mile of this queer wall in sight. And I'm sure one of those other stiles is less trouble to make, and less awkward to get over."

"Use your eyes, I say," cried Bob; "what do you call that chap, and that, and that?"

"Why, they're hares. No, they are not big enough—"

"No, nor yet quite the right colour," interrupted Bob; "they're rabbits, and this part of the common has been inclosed—8000 or 9000 acres, I believe—for a warren, and common stiles and common fences won't do for such customers as rabbits; and so, the warreners make such walls as that, and stiles *over* them, if they are obliged to have a stile for a footpath at all; and they look well to see that bunny doesn't burrow through or under the wall, and the furze at top keeps him from jumping over—though I don't think he is much given to jumping, not half so much as a hare."

Jack was extremely pleased to see the rabbits hopping about, much tamer than he had ever seen them before, and asked his cousin a good many questions about them. While talking, they continued walking on over the warren, passing two or three ponds, much grown up with reeds and stunted willows, in their way.

"Do you hear that noise?" cried Bob, all at once, "something like the buzzing of a great bee?"

"Something like it," replied Jack. "Why, it *is* the buzzing of a bee."

"Where is it, then?" laughed Bob.

"Somewhere here, in this long grass. It's got

entangled somehow, I should think. Ah! you may laugh; but I am sure it is a bee."

Jack began to search about very closely in the grass at the place he thought the sound came from, which continued to be heard at intervals of half a minute or so, and lasted several seconds. Only, somehow, when he stooped down and looked at the place where he thought he heard it the last time, it never seemed to be quite there, but a little further away. Bob stood by, chuckling, and casting a look up into the sky every minute or two. At last Jack gave it up in despair, but still persisted the bee was there, somewhere.

"No," said Bob, "it's up in the air."

"Up in the air! Nonsense! What do you mean?"

"Why, look there," Bob called out, pointing up into the sky. "What's that?"

"Why, a bird to be sure."

"I know: but what is it doing?"

"Why, flying round. But what a curious way of flying! Why, it's coming down, with its wings moving quite in a different way. Ah! now it's rising up again; and I declare, there's the buzzing noise, and it seems to me now to come from the bird."

"Ah! that's because you are looking in the right direction now. That's a snipe, and he

doesn't like our intrusion on his quarters. His nest is not far from where we are standing; and so he flies in that way. Look! there he comes down again in his curve, and how fast his wings go! And now up, and we hear the buzzing—for the sound takes a few seconds to reach us at this distance—after he has got someway downwards. He's called 'heather-bleater' sometimes, from his making that sound, and some people call it 'drumming.' It sounds to me much more like buzzing."

Disturbed by the talking, and the rather loud tones of Master Bob, three more snipes started from the swampy ground near the lads, two of which immediately began, on reaching a sufficient height in the air, to emit the buzzing or bleating sound. The other flew a little distance, and dropped again to the ground. Bob was watching this one. As soon as he saw it alight, he said to his companion, "I'm certain there's a nest here, and it's not far from that stub."

"What makes you think so?" cried Jack, very eagerly, all excitement at the thought of finding an egg so rare as he considered the snipe's.

"Because I think one of those three that just got out about here is a hen, that was on her nest till we came up making so much noise, and I think she flew from close by that," pointing to

the stub. A few moments' search proved he was right. About a yard from the stub, in a little hollow on a little spot of dry ground, lay four eggs, of a dusky or dark green, spotted and blotched with dark brown, almost black, their smaller ends very pointed, and all four symmetrically arranged with their smaller ends in the middle.

"Here we have 'em," exclaimed Bob.

Jack hastened to him, at the expense of a foot and leg dipped deep in the swamp, which he did not think about in his haste.

"Those, snipe's eggs?" he said, when he caught sight of them. "Why, they are too big! Such a little bird as a snipe could never lay such thumping big eggs as that! Why, they are as big as partridges' eggs, and I think bigger."

"However, snipe's eggs they are," replied Bob, "and two of them we must have for our collection. You are right enough about the size; they are, if anything, bigger than the partridge's egg, and that too, though the partridge is nearly five times as heavy as a snipe. I remember seeing my father weigh some partridges. Some of them were about 1¼ lb. each; and then I tried how many snipes would balance one partridge, and I found five made the scale the partridge was in go up."

As the boys passed on over the warren, Jack's regards were strongly aroused by seeing three or four rabbits totally black. He supposed some tame ones must have been turned down there. Bob said he thought not, but he could not be sure. While they were discussing the point, the warrener came in sight, who seemed to recognise Bob, and to be pleased to see him. To him the question was referred as to the origin of the black rabbits. He said that varieties in colour were by no means uncommon among wild rabbits; that black ones were often met with, and different shades of what he called "sandy," or dun. White ones, also, with red eyes, were not of very rare occurrence. Bob recollected having seen two of that description that had been shot one day near his home. He thought he heard them called an Albino variety. The warrener added that there was also another variety, which was carefully preserved on some warrens on account of the greater value of their skins. The boys understood him to call rabbits of this variety—which, he said, none but warreners would distinguish from the ordinary grey rabbit—by the name of "sprigs," or "silver-sprigs." Bidding the warrener good-day, they now left the warren, and struck across the open common or heath. Here the cries and wheelings and tumblings over in the air of several birds,

which showed a good deal of white about their plumage, greatly amused the two walkers. As they approached a particular part of the common, the birds redoubled their cries and antics. Some of them approached within a few yards of the boys; others, flying at some little height, all at once seemed bent on striking against the earth, in such a headlong way did they precipitate themselves downwards, and all of them making a great noise with their wings. Jack knew these birds, though he had never seen them before in the earlier part of the year, nor, consequently, ever heard the strange cries they were now uttering. By their note and name of "pewit," or "pee-wit," he knew them well enough, and very keen he became to find their nests, as soon as he knew that all this uproar and uneasiness was occasioned by the intrusion of their two selves on the birds' breeding domains. Bob told him it was very doubtful if they would be lucky enough to find a nest, for he thought the lapwing was cunning enough to run to some distance from its nest before commencing all these violent outcries and flappings about. And he had often seen that the cries of one were presently the means of bringing ten or twenty others, (which, the moment before, were not seen or suspected to be near,) from different parts round the place where the intruder

was, and that they would follow him to some distance: from which he inferred that it did not necessarily follow, that because the birds paid such persevering and noisy attention to the visitor, therefore he must be very near their nests, or perhaps, any of them. People who observed their habits closely, as those who made a temporary living by finding and selling their eggs would be sure to do, he added, could tell whereabouts the nests were. And he had heard that some were so expert in finding them, from mere observation of the conduct of the birds, that they could walk straight up to within a few feet even of the eggs they were seeking.

The boys had now nearly reached the point which Bob had proposed as the limit of their walk. This was the highest point of the common, and indeed in the whole district for many miles round. It was called Hagley Beacon, and they had often heard, not only that the materials for a great blaze had been carefully kept there in readiness to be set fire to, when people's thoughts were full of a French landing a good many years ago; but that one night it actually was set blazing, to the great discomfort of the good people of Elmdon and the neighbourhood. The Beacon watcher said it was a half idiot lad, a nephew of his, that he had with him for company,

had done it while his back was turned; but many people, who knew he had been at the "Red Lion" almost all the afternoon, thought it was just as likely to have been himself. At all events, he was either asleep or drunk, and so he was not allowed to return to his post after the inquiry which took place next day; for half the country had been alarmed, and Elmdon, by midnight, had been crowded by the Militia and Yeomanry hurrying in from the whole country-side. But there was an object of greater interest than the mere site of a beacon, for all the summit of the hill was enclosed by a circular trench or mound. In fact, it was one of the most perfect British camps to be met with anywhere about; and the size of the stones, which had made the substratum of the earthwork, showed that it had been a place of great strength, and probably, importance. In many parts, little but the stones was now left, all utterly irregular in shape, and of every size, from mere pebbles to masses weighing some tons: the earth that had once covered them having been loosened and carried away by the frosts and storms of twenty centuries. But still, there lay the camp perfect in outline, and many other remains of earthworks or fortifications stretching off in two directions to a considerable distance. The cousins were just leaving

that part of the common where the Pewits had so belabored them with noisy cries and wheelings, intending to pay a brief visit to the camp, when Bob caught Jack hastily by the arm, exclaiming at the same moment, "Stop, I say, stop;" and half pushing his friend over backwards, as he spoke. "Why, what's the matter?" inquired Edwards. "You were just going to squash those beauties with your great clumsy foot," he said, pointing to the ground at Jack's feet, where lay three of the unhoped, almost unlooked-for eggs of the pewit, all arranged points inwards, as was the case with the snipe's eggs. Much rejoicing in this treasure-trove they pressed onwards to the camp, which Jack surveyed with great interest and a vast desire to have unlimited explanation available. His cousin told him there were many other remains in the district, of its ancient British inhabitants; tumuli, earthwork circles, standing stones, a stone circle nearly perfect, and the site of a British settlement or village, all of which they might go to see as opportunity offered; and, besides which, in the museum, there was a tolerably perfect collection of British antiquities, some of them found near the camps or circles in the district, but not a few taken out of different tumuli or barrows which had been opened in two or three different parts of the very common they

now were on. Hearing this, Jack was for nothing less than buying a couple of spades as soon as they got back, and coming their very next holiday to dig on their own account. He was sure they might find some curious and interesting things within the ring of the camp; and if not, those three barrows, about 200 yards east of it, he was sure, would well repay their labour. Bob said he thought Jack was proposing what would be work enough for half a dozen men for as many days; and besides, that leave must be asked, not only of the Doctor, but of the Lord of the Manor, before any digging or excavation could take place. Yielding his plans to necessity with some unwillingness, Edwards followed his companion's steps, which where now bent in the direction of Fox Spinney. In order to reach the wood so called, they had to pass partly along and partly through a sort of marsh, one part of which was a good deal grown up with alders and willows; another part was a complete morass; and bordering this was a large pond or mere, the water around more than half the circuit of which was completely grown up with reeds and flags and bulrushes. As they came fairly in sight of the open water—though still almost concealed themselves—Bob espied about a score of ducks swimming quietly about near the middle. He pointed them

out to Jack, who had never seen wild ducks before, except on the wing occasionally in the winter time, or at the poulterers' shops. The lads were near enough, not simply to count up nineteen birds in all, but to make out that fourteen were mallards, two ducks, and three much smaller birds. Jack wondered to see so many drakes and so few ducks, and inquired what the smaller fellows were. He was informed that the missing ducks were sitting, somewhere among the reeds, no doubt; and that the small birds were teal. Bob then pointed out a number of other birds of different sorts, passing in and out among the flags and bulrushes, or swimming and diving at no great distance from them. The black birds about as big as pigeons, which kept flirting their tails as they swam, showing two or three white feathers in them as they did so, Jack recognised as water-hens. The much larger black birds with white oval marks on their foreheads, where the water-hen has similar shaped reddish marks, were unknown to him. Bob told him they were coots. And those little chaps more out in the open, who disappeared and reappeared in their incessant divings as if they had been hatched and equipped for nothing else, he said, were little grebes, or dabchicks. And very amusing little fellows they seemed to be. In his excitement at watching one

of them in particular, which, in his repeated divings, had come much closer than the rest to the spot, Jack took a step forward, and uttered a hasty exclamation as his foot sunk in a soft place, and he himself staggered forward in the attempt to save a fall. Disturbed by the cry, the mallards all drew together with their heads up, the coots and moorhens went scudding along towards the covert of the flags, and Jack's heart gave a great thump as a sudden rustling and flapping ensued almost under his very nose. He had, in fact, nearly fallen into a duck's nest, and the old lady, who had sat very quietly as long as the two visitors kept themselves quiet, now thought it was time to get out of the way of so unceremonious an intruder, and hastily took flight. This was the signal for the mallards to do the same, for the dabchicks to dive, and for the other birds, with croaks and low cries, to conceal themselves among the water-plants. Jack's regret at putting an end to a scene which had delighted him so much, was a little lessened by the thought, that at least his awkwardness had given them the opportunity of adding a couple of wild duck's eggs to their stock. But to this appropriation Bob would by no means consent. He said he knew the gamekeeper would not like them to take these eggs, and that he thought it would be as

wrong to take them, at least without leave, as it would eggs from a partridge's or pheasant's nest; and that therefore they certainly ought not to think of it. Jack was not quite convinced, but gave up the point without further contest. Bob, however, completed his conquest by adding, that he knew the gamekeeper trusted to his honour not to take any of the eggs he had named; and that even if it were not so, he should not like to do what he knew he, the gamekeeper, would not like; as he had been very kind to him often, in giving him several eggs that otherwise he might not have easily got.

Part of this conversation took place as they passed through a little thicket, just before they got to the stile that gave admission to the foot-path through the wood. It so happened that the gamekeeper had been at the edge of the wood trying to get a magpie, which had nested in a tree just within the fence, when the flight of the ducks warned him there was some alarm in the marsh. He walked on, therefore, towards a corner from which he could see over part of the marsh, and had just got there as the boys came past. He immediately came forward and spoke very civilly and kindly to Bob, whom he knew well, and asked what eggs they were talking about. Bob told him of Jack's nearly floundering into a

duck's nest, and how he had thought he might very well have a couple of the eggs, until he, Bob, had said they ought not. The keeper said they should not be disappointed, as there was never a year when he did not get a few wild ducks' eggs that were not hatched; and he would be sure and save them a couple during the present season; and then, adding a few words about "Master Robert always acting like a gentleman," he asked them to go on with him to the boat-house, and he would take them to seek some of the coots' nests and those of the other birds they had observed on the water; stating that they would have no difficulty in finding several of either sort. Edwards was in ecstasies at the thought; but Bob, thanking the keeper very heartily for his kind offer, asked him first to tell them what o'clock it was; for he was afraid they had taken so much time in the warren, and on the common, and in the marsh, that they would have little more than enough left to enable them to get home in good time, and make themselves clean and tidy for roll-call. It was even so; and with a feeling of no little disappointment the lads thanked the kind keeper once more, and prepared to return to the school.

As they turned to leave him, the keeper asked them when they would next be able to get up so far.

Bob thought for a minute, and then, with a sort of shout, exclaimed, "Why, Monday is Founder's Day, and we always have a holiday then. Will you be busy on Monday?" he added, looking up at the keeper.

"No," he answered; "what time can you be here?"

"Oh! by one o'clock, at all events; if that will suit you."

"Very well, then. I'll be at this stile about one o'clock; and it is very likely I shall be able to show you something in the woods, too, if you have time."

The two boys now wished him good afternoon with more thanks, and set off at a good pace homewards. They had plenty of time to remove all traces of water and bog, and presented themselves, perfectly clean and neat in hair and dress, when the bell summoned them to evening roll-call and their supper.

CHAPTER IV.

Walk the Second—Robert Banks—Dabchicks, Coots, Water-hens, Reed-warblers, their Nests and Eggs.

Friday and Saturday passed, with their routine of school tasks and duties; Sunday, too, passed, with its sermon from Dr. Noble, which almost all the elder lads looked to with interest, and of which not a few among them tried to make a sort of sketch, to be looked at in after days. And then came Monday. The morning was dull, and our two young friends were quite disposed to feel assured that it would rain, and that their excursion—on which they were reckoning so much—would fall through. However, the clouds broke away before they were liberated from the two hours' work which was required of them on occasion of any such holiday as the present. The time that must elapse before they could set off to the appointed place was spent by them in neatly affixing the eggs they had obtained in their last walk to cards with strong gum-water, and adding

a name-label to each card, written in a very neat and methodical manner by Bob. The eggs in question had been very carefully blown, and dried, at the first leisure time after being brought safely home; and now, when they were carefully adjusted to their proper places, they were set safely aside, for the gum to harden, until their owners' return, when they would be at once inducted into their proper place in the collection; which was now found to number nearly one hundred eggs, belonging to nearly sixty different species of birds: for they had no duplicate specimens of some seven or eight kinds of eggs.

In their eagerness to lose no time, when once they were at liberty to set out—for Dr. Noble made no scruple of giving them the required permission—they arrived at the stile fully a quarter of an hour before the gamekeeper. Bob filled up the interval by telling Jack something about that person. His name, he said, was Robert Banks. He was born at the place where Mr. Benson (Bob's father) lived, and he had spent his youth there; and, as a lad, he had often been made useful by Mr. Benson's gamekeeper in catching rabbits, tending the dogs and the ferrets, carrying the gamebag, and marking for the gentlemen who were out shooting, and so on. When about eighteen years old he had been induced by

an uncle, who was master of a coasting vessel, to go to sea. He had spent nearly two years on board a coaster and then shipped in an Indiaman, in which he had made three or four voyages, conducting himself to the entire satisfaction of his officers, who had already taken care to advance him as far as his age would permit. And as he had taken pains to keep up what he had learnt at school, and to improve himself by reading, they had not only helped him by putting useful books in his way, but had promised him their interest to obtain him a higher position than that of a common seaman whenever an opportunity might offer.

"He was in the ship *Samarang*," Bob continued, "homeward bound, about fifteen years ago, and my uncle Thomas was a passenger in her that same voyage. A violent storm came on, and they were sadly tossed about for the greater part of two days. Just as they thought the worst of it was over, and that their good ship—which had behaved splendidly—had weathered it, a tremendous thunderstorm came on, and an awful flash of lightning struck her. Her mainmast was completely shivered and her foremast damaged, and she speedily became unmanageable. The storm, though much abated, was still violent enough to make their danger very great. The wreck still hampered them; they had lost several of the crew

by the lightning and the fall of the mast; the sea was very high, and the wind violent. Robert Banks stood by his captain and the second officer (the others were lost,) nobly; and by his influence with the crew, and his exertions, brought most of the men, who, from the violence of the shock, believed nothing less than that the vessel was instantly about to founder, and were half helpless with consternation, to second him in obeying their officers' orders. They were thus enabled, at last, to cut away the hamper; and eventually—the storm continuing most providentially to subside—to get her before the wind; but not before she had so strained herself in her rollings as to have sprung at least one serious leak. It was not till the next day that the captain was able to ascertain his position, and he then found that, if he could succeed in keeping afloat, and could make his course a little more to the southward, he might have a fair chance of falling in with some home-bound ship or other, or possibly even reach a port. However, neither of these contingencies was to be realized: for that night, the watch being utterly exhausted by the fatigues of the storm and their subsequent spells of pumping, betrayed their charge and fell asleep; and it was only when Banks—unable to sleep from the pain of two ribs which he had got broken in his exertions the previous day, but

had said nothing about—came on deck, that the alarm of "Breakers a-head!" was given; and that too late to save the ship. However, every effort was made to prepare for the inevitable shock, and by great good fortune the ship was made to take the reef, where there was a little break in the water, bows on, and there she remained firmly fixed; and it appeared that, if only it continued calm, she was not likely to be much damaged at present. The day was now eagerly looked for, and at length it came; but alas! at the same time came signs which all understood but too well. A dark bank was seen rising, as it were, out of the sea, to the northward; the swell rose longer and higher; and it was evident another gale was brewing. On the other side, at a distance of apparently two or three miles, lay what seemed to be an island of some extent; but how were they to get there? Only one of their remaining boats was undamaged, and that the smallest: two having been carried away bodily in the fall of the masts. They had very little time to prepare. Already the surf struck them harder blows, and made the poor ship quiver throughout. Banks tried to induce the sailors to help him in constructing a raft; but, worn out and despairing, they had got to the spirit hold, and would no longer listen to reason. Three or four endeavoured to lower the

remaining boat, and the captain and his officer exerted themselves in making every preparation which could bethought of, and time would permit. Meanwhile, Banks and my uncle did what they could in lashing together some planks and spars, according to a plan Banks had often thought of in his leisure hours. He feared, if the gale came on as rapidly as he expected, the boat would not live, even if the half-dozen men who were still sober could succeed in getting her safely away from the ship; and, though the chance with the raft was not much better, he said, at all events, the boat would be less overloaded if one or two tried to stick by the raft. My uncle was determined he would stay with Banks, and the end came sooner than even he expected. The surf struck the ship with increasing violence; a few of these heavier blows laid her almost broadside on, and then she heeled over so far that it was impossible any longer to walk on the deck. The boat fortunately floated, as did the raft. Banks, who had expected something of the sort, was safe on it, when he saw my uncle struggling in the water near. To leap in and help him to reach the raft was a work of few seconds, and in a moment more he caught one of the ship's boys who was floating by senseless. The next thing he observed was that half a dozen of the crew, half-sobered by

terror, flung themselves into the boat, where the captain, second officer, and five sober men already were, and it was swamped or upset in an instant. The same moment a terrific sea struck the ship, and fell over on the struggling men, appearing to overwhelm them instantaneously: for only one of them was ever seen again, and that only for a second. The same sea shook the raft and tried its lashings severely, but also gave it an impulse in a shoreward direction. Banks, after casting an anxious look round to see if he could rescue anybody else, seized the oars he had provided and lashed securely, and, with the help of the wind, which, though strong and waxing stronger, was in the right direction, and the protection which the reef afforded behind them by breaking the rollers, succeeded in guiding and impelling his frail vessel to within a short distance of the shore. Here, however, one of the lashings of the raft—sorely tried by the increasing agitation of the waters—gave way, and all of them, after a short and vain attempt to repair damages, were thrown amid the foaming waters. Banks and my uncle struck out, the former still taking charge of the boy, who had only partially recovered his consciousness, but whom he had succeeded in lashing to a spar; and after a short but terrible struggle found themselves safe on land. Once on the shore, Banks'

strength failed him at once. Fatigue, and bodily injury and pain, together with the excitement of this hard struggle and escape, had proved too strong for even his spirit and strength, and he fell helpless before he had actually got beyond the reach of the waves; and my uncle, who, though much exhausted, had still some strength left, had to drag both him and the boy sufficiently high on the beach to be out of the way of the surging billows."

"But here he comes himself," exclaimed Bob, "and you must ask him to tell you all the rest of it himself, some day when he has nothing better to do; and then you will hear things that will make you like him even more than I see you are already inclined to do."

The gamekeeper now came up with the key of the boat-house in his hand, and after saying he hoped they had not been waiting long, took the path which led to the boat-house at the other side of the mere, where the water was deep. Once there, they were not long in embarking, and Bob showed it was not the first time he had been in a boat, by taking an oar and pulling in very fair style. There were about the same number of mallards and teal as there had been on their previous visit, and they very soon took flight; coming in sight again, however, once or twice, as if to reconnoitre, and then, as it seemed, flying away

to a distance. There was also great commotion among the coots and moorhens, and in a minute or two not one was to be seen; though their notes were still heard from time to time from among the reeds. After rowing a short distance, Bob and the keeper, as if by mutual understanding, drew in their oars, and suffered the boat to advance by the impulse they had already given it. In this way, when the boat had passed on four or five times her own length, and was now moving very slowly and gently, they knew that if they kept themselves very motionless and silent they might approach within a very short distance of the dabchicks; and Jack was intensely interested in watching these little divers sinking themselves gradually in the water, as the boat came within a few yards of them, until at last the water almost covered their backs; and then, with a motion so quick as to baffle the eye, under they went; coming up again within a few yards, watchfully ready to repeat the evolution if it seemed necessary. As long as the party in the boat remained quite still, a dozen of these little birds might be seen within gunshot; the moment the oars were resumed all disappeared as if by magic. The keeper now directed the boat to a part of the mere where some waterplants showed themselves at the surface of the water. Here Jack, who was

UNIVERSITY OF ARTS LIVERPOOL

in the bows of the boat, saw several objects which seemed to him to be shapeless masses of weed. The keeper directed his course so as to come within reach of one of these, and told Bob to go forward and see what it contained. Master Bob was rather at a loss here, and said—

"Why, it's nothing but weeds, Robert."

Banks replied with a smile. "Lift off those weeds which lie at the top, Master Robert."

Master Robert did so, and to his surprise no less than six eggs,—rather long in proportion to their width, and as large at the "little," as at the "big" end,—greeted his eyes. But what infinitely perplexed him was that no two of them were exactly alike in colour. One was nearly white, and another was of a dirty red colour, something resembling the stain left by blood on white paper two or three days after its application, only dirtier and muddier. The other eggs were of shades intermediate between those of these two.

"Why, what are they?" he asked, in a doubting tone; "I thought they had been dabchicks; but dabchicks' eggs, I know are white."

"So were these, Master Robert, when the bird laid them. And one, you see, is still nearly white. That is the egg last laid; and that darkest is the one she laid first. I suppose it's the weeds she lays on them, whenever she leaves the nest, that

colour them. I don't know how else it is done. But I do know that I hardly ever saw a nest, out of all the hundreds I have seen here, with the eggs left uncovered. Why, look yonder"—pointing to two or three nests about fifty yards further on—"there is a bird now pecking away about her nest, as if her life depended on it. She's covering her eggs, and if we move on you'll see her dip into the water and dive away. Some folks say they sit a-top of weeds and all; but, I must say, I don't think they do. It is my belief they have the weeds laid ready just round the nest, and put them on when they want to go away for a bit."

Certainly, the lads thought they saw, not only the bird pointed out by the keeper, but several others, go through exactly the process he had described, previous to leaving their nests as the boat approached; and they were quite ready to think as he thought. Bob asked a great many questions about these curious little birds, and got the following information from the keeper:—They made their appearance usually about the middle of April. Sometimes a pair or two appeared first, and then, a few days after, the rest, to the number of twenty-five or thirty pairs. They were occasionally seen on the wing during a week or two after their arrival. Banks believed it was only

the males. Sometimes while flying—their flight being always in circles over the water, very rapid, and at no great height above it—they uttered a note, which might be partly imitated by drawing a stick rapidly over wooden palings. Their departure in the autumn was as sudden and mysterious as their arrival in spring; and where they went to, and how they went, with their short wings, and apparent disinclination to use them, he really could not tell. He had heard folks say that a few might always be found in the marshes near the sea, in winter time; but how they got there he could not imagine.

Leaving this part of the mere, the boat was now directed to a quarter where the water was shallower, and where, every here and there, little grassy knolls stood out amid the water, and a few willow stubs were seen growing. Here, three or four water-hens' nests were discovered in as many minutes, containing from three up to half a score eggs. These nests were constructed of a large quantity of dry materials, and seemed very snug and warm, and quite secure from wet; very different from the dabchicks' nests, which were merely piles of wet weeds supported on the surface of the water, but so little raised above it that the eggs were wet, and the slightest pressure of a finger caused the water to rise rapidly in them;

so much so, that the lads wondered how eggs, so constantly kept wet, could ever contrive to get hatched.

After having satisfied their curiosity among these nests and taken the eggs they wanted, they proceeded to a part of the mere where the reeds and flags grew pretty close and made a thickish cover. Here they soon found a couple of coots' nests; large and strong structures built of withered flags and reeds, and one of them founded on a pile of similar materials reaching to the bottom, where the water was eighteen inches deep. The game-keeper told them some of these nests were so strongly built as to support a man sitting down upon them. Here again they secured the eggs they wished to have, and were beginning to think they had got all the varieties they had any right to expect, when the keeper drew their attention to a little bird whose notes, in various places among the reeds, were almost literally incessant, and asked if they knew it and had got its eggs in their collection. Bob listened for a moment and asked if it were not the sedge bird.

"That may be the name of the bird, sir," answered the keeper, "but I have generally heard it called the reed-chat.* You may find many of their nests among these reeds,

* The bird which Banks meant is called the reed-warbler.

and very beautiful, and wonderful for contrivance they are."

So speaking, he pushed more in among the reeds, and in a few seconds, the boys had the delight of seeing a nest perfectly new to both of them. It was attached to the stems of five separate reeds—rather high up them—was composed of the flowering tops of the reeds, and was made very deep indeed for its size. Noticing this particular, the gamekeeper said he thought it might be to prevent the eggs or young ones tumbling out when the wind blew very strongly.

"For sometimes," he said, "the reeds bent down so much before the wind, it was wonderful how the eggs remained in at all."

Before they left the reed-bed they had found eight or ten of these nests, though at the expense of very wet feet and legs; for they found they could get about so much better on foot than in the boat. Nothing would content Bob but cutting the reeds supporting one of the nests in order to take it bodily home for Dr. Noble, who, he thought, would be pleased to see it.

They now returned to the boat-house, highly delighted with their expedition on the mere. Leaving the boat-house, the keeper asked them if they had time to go into the wood with him. Ascertaining from him what o'clock it was, they

found they had time enough, if they did not loiter by the way. So off they started at a brisk pace.

Soon after they entered the wood, the keeper asked them if they wanted any jay's eggs, as he had shot a pair of jays which had built in a low tree not far from where they now were.

Bob replied he had some, which he had obtained last year. Jack, however, who from the delight and success of the last and the present walk, was keener than ever to add to his stores of country lore and natural-history knowledge, begged Banks to take him to see the nest just as it was. Accordingly, they turned out of the "ride" they were now walking rapidly along, and presently came under what Jack thought—in his cursory observation of it—was a random collection of loose sticks; till Bob and the keeper both assured him it was a genuine jay's nest.

"Why, I can see daylight through it," he exclaimed.

"Yes, and the eggs too, very likely," Bob added.

Nothing would content Jack but to see one or two of the eggs; in fact, he wanted to get a look into the nest from above as well as from below; but he had never yet tried to climb, and was rather shy of making the attempt. However, Bob, who had a pretty good idea of what was

passing in his cousin's mind, told him the best way of seeing the eggs was by getting up to the nest himself, and showed him how it easily might be done, by getting up an adjoining tree, and walking along one of its branches, which extended horizontally very near the nest; and which, he said, was quite strong enough to bear Jack's weight without breaking, or even bending much.

"And there is another," he said, "about a yard higher, you can hold by."

Jack began his climb at once, and having good strong arms and hands, and a steady head, was soon upon the bough pointed out to him by his companion, and carefully sidling along it towards the nest. As it bent and wavered with his weight and movements, he did not feel quite so comfortable as when climbing up the stiff tree stem; but, determined not to be beat, after a moment's pause to steady himself, he went on again; and, in a second or two, had the pleasure of finding that by kneeling on the bough he had, so far, walked on, grasping the branch above very firmly with his right hand, he could not only reach the eggs, but see them as they laid not half a yard from his eyes. He was bent upon having a memorial of this, his first bird's-nest reached by climbing; but how to bring away the eggs,—that was the question.

To put them in his pockets he knew would

ensure a disagreeable smash. His cap had fallen off in his ascent; and besides, if it had been still on his head, he thought it would be doubtful if the eggs would travel very safely on the top of his head as he scrambled down again. He was in utter perplexity. They would break if he dropped them: even if he asked Bob to catch them, their fate would probably be no better. How was he to contrive? Bob called to him to make haste and come down, as their time was short. In reply he mentioned his dilemma.

"Why, lad, what was your mouth made for?" was Bob's laughing solution of the difficulty.

And presently, with an egg safe in each cheek, Jack commenced, and in safety completed, his descent to the ground.

The three now pressed on rapidly in the direction they were pursuing before this episode of the jay's nest, and after about ten minutes' walk they stopped near an ash tree of no very great size. It appeared the keeper had been speaking to Bob on the subject of their present quest, for pointing to a place in the tree, about eight feet from the ground, whence a branch appeared to have fallen, he said,

"There's the hole, sir."

And a hole there was, certainly, nearly circular, and less than two inches in diameter.

"What's in it?" asked Jack, as soon as he perceived it.

"Oh! the nest of a very curious bird, and one moreover whose eggs, from a nasty habit the bird has of laying them in holes in trees, are not easy for boys to get. Don't you think you could get your hand in there, Jack? It's a bit smaller than mine; and Banks here will hold you up; wont you, Banks?"

"Certainly, sir, with all the pleasure in life," replied Banks; and accordingly Jack was hoisted up by the keeper, so effectually that his face was nearly on a level with the hole. Naturally enough he applied his eye to it to see if he could make out anything of the interior. He had scarcely done so, however, before he drew it back so suddenly, and with such a jerk, that if Banks had not been prepared for something of the sort, Jack would have thrown himself, and possibly his bearer as well, headlong down.

"Let me down, Mr. Banks, let me down," he cried; "there's a snake in the hole."

Bob enjoyed the success attending his trick (for on hearing from the keeper what he had got to show them in the wood, he had plotted this surprise for his cousin) to such a degree that he could hardly repress his roars of laughter. Jack felt his dignity affronted, and declared there *was* a snake.

It had hissed fearfully as he put his eye to the hole.

"Snake or no snake, let me get up, Banks," said Bob; and up he mounted, in his turn, on Banks's shoulder. The hissing was audible enough, and sounded formidable enough, certainly: but Bob was not deterred. As he had said, his hand was much too large to get into the hole; but the kind gamekeeper had foreseen this difficulty, and provided against it, by using a very fine saw and taking out a piece of the tree—indeed it was little more than bark, so much decayed was the trunk—at a little distance from the aperture; and so neatly that, when replaced, the tree appeared untouched. He had fixed a screw into this which served as a sort of handle. Taking hold of this screw, the severed piece of wood came out, and there was an irregular oval hole big enough for Bob to put his hand and arm in. No sooner did this kind of trap-door begin to open than a bird darted out of the original hole, and flew to a tree at some little distance. Jack was looking for the snake: the flight of the bird rather staggered him in his certainty that there was a snake; for a living snake and a living bird in the same hole were scarcely compatible. The next moment Bob exclaimed,

"Six eggs—such beauties!—And no snake, Jack," he added the moment after.

Two of the eggs were in his mouth, the trap-door replaced, and himself on the ground before his cousin had quite recovered himself. However, the sight of the eggs—two delicate, smooth, white shining eggs—speedily set him right.

"What beauties! What are they?" he cried.

"Snake's eggs, to be sure," Bob answered: "didn't you see the snake fly out?"

"Nonsense; but what are they?"

The keeper interposed:

"We country folk often call it 'snakebird,' Master Edwards, because of its hissing noise. It always makes that noise when disturbed on its nest; and it seems no ways ready to leave its nest either," he concluded.

"But what other name has it?" demanded Jack.

"Oh, two or three more," said Bob. Sometimes it's called cuckoo's mate, or cuckoo's companion; and sometimes long-tongue and sometimes emmet-hunter. But its book name, and ordinary name, is wryneck, from the peculiar plumage of its neck, which gives that part of its body a wry or twisted appearance."

"What's its nest like?" interposed Jack.

"Oh, only a little rotten wood, which it pecks down from the decayed inside of the tree."

"Why is it called by so many names?" was the next question.

"It is called cuckoo's mate, because it usually appears about the same time as the cuckoo, and makes its presence known, as the cuckoo does, by a very peculiar note. It is called long-tongue, because its tongue is immensely long, and seems to be used mainly in taking its food. It is called emmet-hunter, because ants or emmets form a considerable portion of its food;—and people who have had them in confinement, say it is a very curious sight to see them feeding, if supplied with a portion of an ant-hill and its teeming inhabitants. The tongue is thrust out and drawn back with wonderful quickness, and every time an ant, or one of the eggs, is drawn in and swallowed. The eye can't keep pace with the speed at which the tongue moves. Look, there she is again," added Bob. "There, climbing up that tree. Look, on the trunk, like walking up it. There, she has just twisted out of sight."

Jack, however, soon caught sight of her again, and observed that she did not climb nearly as well as the creeper, with which he was acquainted, and that, as she moved about the tree, she did not seem to make any use of her tail, as the creeper and woodpeckers do.

It was now time for our young friends to move

off homewards with all speed. So, opening their egg-case, which Bob had with some ingenuity constructed out of an old botanical case, and seeing to the safe packing of all their new treasures, eking out their cotton wool with some fine moss, they wished the gamekeeper good afternoon, and started off at a good rapid trot; Bob taking especial care of his reed-warbler's nest for the Doctor, and Jack with the egg-box slung over his shoulder. They reached school in capital time, met the Doctor as they neared the great gate, stopped to touch their caps, and were passing on, when he asked, "What are your treasures?—where have you been?"

"Oh, sir, we have been to the mere, as we asked leave to do, and came home through the Fox Spinney; and we have got eggs of the water-hen, coot, dabchick, reed-warbler, and wryneck, besides two jay's eggs, that Edwards wanted. And this nest—it was the prettiest of all we saw—we have brought for you, sir, in case you might like to see it."

The Doctor thanked them very kindly, and took the nest with evident pleasure, not only because it was really curious and beautiful, but because he liked his pupils to feel and show goodwill towards him. Bidding them make haste and get on dry things, he passed on to his house, and they to their quarters, and were quite ready in time for roll-call.

CHAPTER V.

Walk the Third—Eel-hooks—Setting-lines—Kingfisher's Nest—Dipper and Nest—Wilson's Filmy Fern—Eel, Perch, and Trout caught.

On the following Thursday, the two boys again applied for and obtained permission to take one of their lengthened rambles. Much of their playtime in the intervening days had been pleasantly filled up with careful preparation and mounting of the acquisitions of the last excursion; and another portion had been occupied with discussions as to the direction and objects of their next walk, which they fixed for Thursday afternoon, if the day were suitable.

Bob thought they might vary the interest by having an afternoon's fishing. Jack, however, was so much taken up with his new experiences as to the habits and haunts of birds, that he begged hard for another nesting expedition. It was at length settled that they would try and combine both pursuits. Bob said he had heard the gamekeeper say that dippers or water-ousels were common in the upper part of the streams feeding

the Whitwater, as well as often to be seen along that stream itself; that they had no eggs of the bird in question, and that they could at least look for a nest: though he did not think, from what he knew of the birds' nesting places, that they were very likely to fall in with one, except by the merest accident. He proposed, therefore, that they should go up Watery-lane, and turn off up Turley-lane, as if going through Fox Spinney; but, instead of leaving the lane for the wood, to keep along it until they came to the bridge over the Whitwater. Arrived at this point, they were—according to his plan—to go a little way up the brook that ran out of the mere (through part of Fox Spinney) into the Whitwater near the bridge, until they could find a place to get across it. Once over the brook, they were to strike across to the river, and proceed to set some lines, baited with large worms and small fish, for the chance of catching some eels, and possibly a trout or two, or a large chub. This done, they would ascend the stream and take their chance of finding, either on it, or one of its feeders from the heights of Hagley Common and Turley Moor, the eggs they were in quest of. Jack thought the suggestion a capital one; and so, their spare time, before two o'clock school, was spent in looking out their hooks and setting-lines. Jack was arranging

several hooks which he thought were what was required. They were ordinary eel-hooks, with eyes at the end of their shanks, and with a portion of finish copper or brass wire, so passed through the eye of the hook and arranged as to be about a finger's length, and four wires thick. These were not twisted together, but very neatly and firmly whipped over with waxed thread: they were, in fact, Bob's own contrivance. He had often lost hooks,—sold as eel-hooks at the shops, with two joints of twisted brass wire, eight or ten inches long in all, attached to them,—from the pertinacious twisting of the eels that had swallowed them. He saw that the length of wire gave the eel an advantage, by letting it have something stiff to push against—a sort of purchase, in other words, through which it was sure to lay hold of some weed, or stick, or stone—and then a few turns more, and good-bye to the hook and the eel together. He saw also that the twisting of the wire helped the mischief; for if the eel twisted the same way with the twist of the arming of the hook, the wire could not bear it, and snapped off; if the other way, the wires opened as they untwisted, and were either bent or re-twisted so unevenly that they gave way on the application of only a slight force. So he devised an untwisted wire armature, of only sufficient length to pass

just through a minnow or small gudgeon, with this view, that if an eel swallowed the bait he must swallow also the whole wire armature; that, at all events, if a part thereof did still project by any chance from the eel's mouth, it might be such as to give him the least possible chance of twisting it off. Bob had found these hooks answer so well in practice that where he used to lose ten, now he scarcely lost one. Well, Jack was laying out some of these, when Bob, who had been busy with other parts of the necessary tackle, observed what he was doing, and interrupted him.

"Those hooks wont do, Jack," he said; "they are only useful in dark nights. Look in the right-hand corner of that box, under that lid"—pointing to a flat box that had once done duty as his sister's work-box, and showed evident tokens of homely joiner's work in its present fittings;—"you'll find there some strong hooks on stout gut. Take out about two dozen of them, and about as many of those twisted horsehair links from the drawer. They are what we must have to-morrow. I hope that thunder-storm this morning will have made the water muddy; for then we shall do."

Jack did as he was bid, and soon everything was ready, except the baits. These could be got after five, or most of them.

Thursday, then, had arrived, and the cousins

started on their expedition. The earlier part of their walk was quite without incident, except those ordinary ones which meet every tolerably observant person's eye in the country, and would, to very many, never seem to lose their homely interest. All of these, however simple and every-day and commonplace, were noticed, though possibly not the least dwelt upon; by Bob, with a dash of much the same sort of feeling as that with which we are conscious, rather than take special note, of the presence of a loved companion whose society has become habitual to us, and whose lengthened absence from our side is a source of restless though tacit uneasiness; by Jack, with much the same sort of pleasant eagerness as we welcome the companionship of a new acquaintance whom we have already found agreeable, and expect, on further intercourse, to find much more so. On reaching the corner of the Spinney, they saw a squirrel run up one of the trees in it, and were much amused at the quickness and ease with which it contrived to keep the trunk of the tree between itself and them; just giving a glance now and then, on one side or the other, as if to see they were not devising any mischief. They did not stay any time, however, to watch him, but moved briskly on. They soon reached the bridge over the Whitwater, and then struck into the

meadow between it and the lower part of Fox Spinney. On reaching the brook which ran out of the Spinney, they turned up its bank, and proceeding about half a mile along it, they observed at one of its bends an old tree, which grew so far out horizontally from the nearer bank as to reach nearly half across the brook. On the other side, there was a piece of dry gravel thrown up by the deflection of the stream at the corner. To scramble along this tree, throw his traps over, and leap after them, was done in a very offhand sort of way by Bob. Poor Jack, whose early experiences had been of a very different kind from his cousin's, managed to get along the tree, though rather awkwardly; but "craned" a good deal as he surveyed the leap. And his inclination to take it was not much aided by looking down, as he stood hesitating, into the rather rapid current beneath him. However, his determination "not to be beat," in trying to do what he saw Bob do, came to his help, and he made his spring. One foot tarried rather too far behind him, and splashed the water well up on the hinder part of his legs. But that he little cared for. Once over, they lost no time in getting to the Whitwater. Jack was now employed in unwinding the lines one by one, and laying out the footlinks straight, while Bob proceeded to bait and

affix the hooks; and that done, to "set" the lines. This he did in most cases by lying down on his breast, with his head and neck over the bank, and then—his jacket and shirt-sleeves being rolled up high on his arm—sticking the peg the line was made fast to well into the bank as far below the surface as he could reach; which done, he coiled the line carefully in his left hand, and then released it as he threw the baits with his right. He had already set five, and had got the sixth ready baited, when, on lying down and reaching over the bank to put in the peg, something darted out from just underneath where he lay, almost into his face, startling him so much by its suddenness that he nearly lost his balance and rolled in. Gathering himself up rather hastily, he cast a glance down the stream, and instantly recognised in the beautiful bird darting along a little above its surface with even flight, the cause of his discomfiture. In an instant he was down again on his breast. Jack almost thought he was going to work himself over the bank into the water head first, water-rat fashion, so eager was he in investigating the part of the bank he had disturbed the kingfisher from. The next instant he shouted out, with all the voice he was capable of in his then position, "Hooray! hooray! Here it is!" Then a call to Jack to

hold his legs, sit down upon them—anything, so as to keep him from slipping over: and he began to fumble with his right hand, apparently at some object in the bank. A minute passed thus, with only "Poof! how it stinks!" uttered by Bob, when all at once he called out,

"I say, Jack, run and cut me a thin willow twig as long as your arm. Never mind me, I can hold."

Jack soon returned with a couple of twigs, and put them into his friend's hand.

"The very thing," he said, taking the longer and more flexible of them. "Now sit as heavy as you can, Jack."

He now proceeded to work this twig into a hole which he had managed already to grope into, some eight or ten inches, in the loose, sandy bank. He then called to Jack to help him up, and rising with a flushed face, he exclaimed—

"We are in luck, old fellow. Here's a king-fisher's nest, 'as sure as shooting,' as Brother Jonathan says."

"Where?" says Jack; "can I see it?"

"Oh, yes," Bob replies, "if you have eyes of the same make as Fine-ear's brother had—I forget what you call him; but you recollect, a three foot wall was as good as a double opera-glass to him. It would save a deal of trouble, though, if you had a gift of that sort; for then we should

know just where the nest is. I think it is about there," pointing to a spot in the turf fully two feet from the extreme edge of the bank. "The hole certainly turns this way, at about half a foot from where I have grubbed to; and that's the mark I made on the stick when I had got it in as far as I could. I think we can get it. You couldn t fetch us one of those spades you were talking of at the Beacon, could you, old fellow?"

Talking thus, Bob was by no means idle. He had taken out a strong one-bladed sort of sailor's knife, which he generally carried with him on these expeditions, and had laid hold on a stake from a hedge about thirty yards distant, and proceeded to work its point into a sort of chisel shape. This done, he laid it on one side, and proceeded—making use of his knife for the purpose—to cut out the turf about a foot wide, in the direction he believed the hole to take. The hedge-stake was then seized, and applied vigorously at the bank end of the strip from which he had removed the turf. The soil was very loose, and gave way readily; and fortunately for the young labourer, no thick root crossed his course. The lesser ones he removed with his knife, now sadly blunted. With such a will did he work, that in a strangely short time he came upon the hole where it opened on the bank. This encouraged him to work on

more energetically still, if anything; and, at the same time, very carefully, in order to keep the guidance which the opening passage afforded him. As he rounded the corner he had spoken of, he had the satisfaction of finding that the direction he had laid out as the probable one appeared to be correct to within a couple of inches. Sticking steadily to his work, at the end of twenty minutes —the odorous whiffs of putrid fish bones and other similar matter rising from the excavation during the whole process serving to convince him, more and more that he was right in believing it to be a nest hole—he had the delight of admitting a glimmer of daylight and his own fingers to a nest containing five eggs. This was a prize indeed, and very carefully were the precious but not sweet-smelling eggs transferred to their travelling berth in the tin box. Repairing damages as well as he could on the bank, by replacing the turf, &c. (as the bird would most likely return to the nest), Bob proceeded to finish the process, so long interrupted, of setting his sixth line. But the nesting spirit had come as strongly upon him now as upon Jack the days before, and he proposed that they should lose no more time in setting lines, but just giving a look first to those already set, start off up the Hagley Common brook or burn, and try their luck for a dipper's nest. Jack assented

eagerly. So, going back to look at their lines, and finding nothing but a small eel on one of them, they replaced the bait and returned the line to the water; and then started upwards with all speed. They had not gone a mile before they saw two pairs of water ousels, but no place that, in Bob's judgment, appeared likely to invite them to build their nest. Jack was greatly delighted, on coming suddenly and quietly round a corner, to behold one of them unconcernedly floating on the water, and the next moment, on detecting the presence of the intruders on its privacy, dip or dive as quickly as the dabchicks had done at the mere. The river was rather too thick to permit him to watch the little bird's course under water; but he presently saw it emerge about twenty yards lower down, and sit for a few seconds on a stone, and then deliberately walk into the water again, and disappear under it. Bob soon hurried him on, however, and very willingly answered his questions about the dipper. He said he had often seen it walking or running on the bottom in shallow water, and that it used its wings as well as its legs in doing so; that it would sometimes walk out of the water as they themselves might after bathing; and at other times it would suddenly come to the surface in the midst of a pool, and take wing therefrom without any trouble. Its

food he believed to be fishes' eggs, and the larvæ of water insects, and the like. He had read that the eggs of many fish took from 70 or 80 to 100 or 110 days after they were extruded to hatch, and these little birds were believed to destroy a great many of them in the meantime. As to their nests, they were big enough to be seen, he said, as the birds used plenty of materials, moss being the principal one; and the nest was very like the wren's in shape, with a lining of dry leaves. But the places they chose to build in were so odd. He had been told of one which was built in the pier of a bridge, in a hole in the masonry which had been left for the masons to insert part of the framework of their scaffolding in, and which had not been filled up when the spar was removed. His father, he said, had found it, having gone under the bridge for shelter when fishing one day, and overtaken by a very heavy shower. Another he had heard of was placed where the waste water from a mill-wheel formed a sort of cascade on falling into the bed of the main stream again. A fisherman's curiosity was excited by seeing the birds passing in and out behind the falling water, and he consequently went over the stream to examine into their motive. He was rewarded by finding a nest built amidst the stonework under the sort of aqueous arch formed by

the falling water, and the young birds perfectly dry, but evidently very hungry. "So we are not very likely to find one, I doubt," he concluded, "for another such lucky accident as that of the kingfisher isn't likely to befal us to-day."

By this time they had reached a point where the descent was rather abrupt. Indeed, in places small waterfalls were seen on the little stream whose course they were following. And soon it grew so narrow they thought it was no use going up any higher. Bob proposed that they should cut across to Turley Brook, and go down by it; not that their chance would be better on it, but rather to vary the walk. Jack assented, and they had just leaped the little stream when a loud halloo greeted their ears. They looked round, and saw a man about two hundred yards up waving his hand to them.

Bob, after a moment's gaze, said,—"I think that's the warrener. I wonder what he has got."

He, seeing that they had caught sight of him and were turning up towards him, directed his course to meet them. As soon as they came up with him he said he had taken the liberty of calling to them, as he knew of a blue hawk's nest on the common, just above the warren, and he thought they might like to have the eggs. He meant to destroy the old birds if he could, but he would

spare them for a day or two till there were two or three eggs—at present there was but one—in the nest, if the young gentlemen liked. They thanked him for thinking of them, and said they should like very much, but they were afraid they could not find time to get up so far for a week at least. Would he be so kind as save the eggs for them? He said he would be sure to do it, and then asked what they were seeking there. They told him, saying, moreover, that they had seen plenty of dippers, but had little hope of finding a nest.

"Well," he said, "I know where there used to be one. I lived over yonder, at Turley, when I was a lad, you see, and many a trout have I got out of Turley Brook. There's a broad pool just over yonder hill-edge that has a sort of heap of broken rocks in the middle of it, and that used to be a famous place for trout. One day I was trying to tickle one or two up there, and I was just against the biggest rock, where there's a hole in like a door; my foot slipped, and I made a deal of splashing and noise in trying to keep up, and out came a dipper right in my face. She had a nest as big as my hat in a hole on the right-hand side."

"How long ago was that?" asked Bob, eagerly.

"Nigh hand fifteen years," replied the warrener.

"Well," says Bob, "thank you for telling us of the hawk's nest, and thank you for telling us where you saw the dipper's nest. I have heard they often build in the same place for years. We were just going over to Turley Brook when you called. We'll go straight to the place you've told us of."

No sooner said than done. Scarcely half an hour had elapsed before they reached the place the warrener had described to them. The brook, which was about seven or eight feet wide, and fringed with trees on both of its rocky banks above, here widened out into a shallow pool of twenty-five or thirty yards broad and forty long, in the midst of which stood a confused, broken mass of rocks, overgrown with brushwood and a few small mountain ashes, forming a very beautiful and picturesque object. There was more water than usual for the time of year. However, Bob was not to be deterred by that. He had his shoes and stockings off, and his trousers rolled half-way up his thigh, in two minutes, while Jack was cutting him a stout stick to support him among the rough and loose stones. Armed with this he was at the door-like cavity among the rocks in a very short time, with no mishap further than getting his right leg into a hole so deep that the water reached above the naked part of his leg. That mattered

little, though, as the trousers were so tightly rolled up they did not easily absorb the water. The doorway seemed to invite him to enter, and so he waded on about knee-deep in water, carefully feeling his way with his staff. On getting within he looked to his right hand, but the rock seemed all tolerably even, and to present not even the semblance of a hole, much less one big enough to admit a mass of the size of a man's hat. Disappointed, but not despairing, he thought it might be his own mistake, and that the warrener had said the left hand and not the right. However, the left side was less rugged even than the right. Giving it up now, he determined to push in as far as he could get. The cavity was about nine feet long by three or three and a-half wide, and about five feet high, reckoning from the bottom of the water, which was rather uneven. At the further end a little glimmering of light shot in from above, which was a good deal lessened, however, by the growth of some plant,—apparently a fern. He now turned to retrace his steps to the entrance. As he moved on, no longer with his back to the light, and so excluding some of it by acting as a sort of shutter, he observed several small ferns growing in the interstices or crevices in the rock. He gathered two or three, and saw they were merely small plants of common sorts. Nearer the

entrance, however, he noticed one with which he was quite unacquainted. He took it for moss at first, but soon saw it could scarcely be that. So he set to work to gather some nice specimens, and in order to do so more conveniently, rested his stick against the rocky wall. While thus occupied he took a step forward to get a very inviting-looking tuft, and in setting his foot down placed it on a very sharp stone and hurt himself smartly. Extending his left hand suddenly towards the rock for support, to his surprise the part he touched gave way or yielded under the pressure. It flashed upon him at once that here was the warrener's hole, filled up, no doubt, with the materials of a former nest. The same moment he heard Jack shouting, and observed a moving object dart in at the opening, and out again, almost too quickly for him to ascertain what it was, except that it was a bird; he suspected, however, that it was a dipper; and now he distinctly heard Jack saying,—

"Did you see that water ousel, Bob? I am sure she has a nest in there somewhere."

With the help of the light, which was now unintercepted, as I have said, and from the fact that his eyes were more accustomed to the dim light of the cavern, Bob presently made out that the mosses on the old nest, as he thought it, were very fresh. Closer inspection showed him a hole,

neat and not the least frayed, as would be the case with an old nest. He forgot all about the pain of his hurt foot, and quickly inserted his fingers. The next moment a joyous shout rolled out of the cave, and conveyed to Jack the glorious news of—"A nest! a nest! and five eggs in it." A couple of them were speedily transferred to his mouth, and, taking his stick again in one hand and retaining his ferns in the other, he made his best speed to rejoin his companion on the bank. It would be difficult to describe the boys' extreme delight at this successful termination of their—as they had really begun to think it—almost hopeless quest. By the broad daylight, too, the fern looked a very promising one; and they agreed it should have a special corner in the egg-case. Jack attended to this and to the stowage of the eggs, while Bob resumed his shoes and stockings; and then, setting off with light hearts, they started downwards to take up their lines and return to the school. About three-quarters of an hour brought them back—Jack charging the Hagley Burn valiantly on the way—to where the kingfisher's nest had been found. Here their attention was first caught by seeing both the birds close by the disturbed and dilapidated entrance to their domicile. But as at least a foot of the passage was left still intact, and they had replaced the turf above so as rather

to overhang the unexcavated part, the lads were not without good hope the two birds would be content to re-occupy their nest, and, if need be, replace the three eggs of which it had been despoiled. They next proceeded to take up their line, and Jack now perceived the use of a wand, about five feet long and not very thick, which Bob had cut and trimmed a few minutes before they reached this point. He passed it along close to the bank slopingly, and so as to pass between the bank and the string, and of course below the peg to which the latter was fastened. Thus doing, he was able to raise the line without the trouble of stooping or lying down, as he had to do when setting it. The line was very slack, he observed, as he brought it up on his stick. "Nothing here, Jack," he said, and, dragging up the peg by a strong pull upwards on the line, he proceeded to wind it carefully up, securing both hooks—from which every particle of bait had been removed, however—as he completed his task. They proceeded to the next line now; Jack had forgotten whereabouts it was, and was not much better about the others. Not so with Bob. He seemed to recollect to a foot where each line was; and, stopping over the one which lay next, he exclaimed, as soon as he set eyes on the water,—

"My word, Jack, we've got one here; a thumper, I should say."

Jack saw the line stretched out quite tight in the water in the direction of a deep pool, just below where they stood. The line was soon caught, and Bob began pulling in, gently though, hand over hand. A wavering motion at the end of the line now began.

"An eel, Jack—it's an eel, and a two pounder, I'll answer for it."

Jack's excitement was intense, and Bob's, to say the truth, not much less. But he did not forget his caution; and in a second or two an eel, as thick as their wrists, and long as their arm, came in sight, waving slowly through its length like a streamer, as Bob pulled on steadily and firmly. Now it was within a yard of the bank, and Bob, altering the direction of his pull, lifted it cannily out, and laid it, writhing and struggling, on the grass. To place his foot firmly on its neck, so as to press it strongly against the turf sideways, and to pass his knife through the backbone at its junction with the bones of the head, was the work of a few seconds. The eel was thus deprived of life and sensation in a moment, and Bob was able to extract the hook without trouble to himself, or pain to the eel. For though it still moved when touched, and would move for hours

if kept moist, he knew very well it was only by muscular contractions excited by the action of the nerves in connexion with the spine, which did not lose their irritability for long after life was extinct in such creatures as the eel. Depositing his line in the bag he carried for the purpose, and the eel in his pannier, they proceeded to the next in succession. This was drawn up blank. The fourth, again, was drawn tight, but not stationary, as where the eel was caught. The end near the bank kept moving from side to side, and it was evident that at the other end rapid motion was going on. The bank-end was soon in Bob's hand, and again a glad exclamation showed he felt he had got "a good 'un." The first pull was succeeded by a rush from the captive fish; the next by a plunge; then a dash to the surface of the water; then another dull plunge; and then a rush into the bank under Bob's very feet.

"Gently, my darling," said Bob, "you'll have enough of the bank in a minute."

And in less than a minute there he lay on the grass, a beautiful perch of nearly a pound and a-half, who had not been able to resist the appetizing looks of a delicate little gudgeon of three inches long. He was stunned with a sharp tap on his head, and consigned to the basket. The fifth line had a troublesome, twisting, slimy, small

eel upon it, which was dealt with very summarily by Bob, and ignominiously cast back into the river. The sixth was rushing about in a strangely vehement way.

"Hallo!" says Bob, "what's the row here, I wonder! That chap doesn't think himself a little 'un, I should say. Very like a whale, and no mistake, is *his* ticket, no doubt. Now, old fellow, take it gently, will you?" as the violent movements of the fish made the line slip off his stick; "draw it mild, I say," as he was baffled a second time in the same way. "Here, Jack, put down the egg-case, and lay hold here as soon as I say 'now!'" Jack was at his side in a moment. "Now!" he sung out, sharp and quick. The rod was in Jack's hand as quickly as the word out of his cousin's mouth, and the next moment Bob was down on his breast, and with safe hold of the line. "Lay hold of my legs, or he'll have me in," he shouted. Jack caught hold firmly. The fish was still for a moment. "Pull me back, Jack," and giving a wriggle backwards at the same time by the help of one hand resting on the bank near the water edge, he got so far back as to be able to gather himself up on his knees. This was accompanied, of course, by a pull on the fish, and it was responded to in an instant by a leap from the water, another and another.

"Look out for squalls, I say, Jack," cried Bob, who waxed slangy in moments of excitement. "We haven't got this chap yet. I hope we haven't 'cotch a Tartar,' as they say in China. I thought we might get a trout here, just below that glorious stream; but I didn't bargain for such a young dolphin as this. My line's strong enough, and the gut too, I think. But the like o' you, sirs, eh! it's just awfu',"—as the trout made such a desperate rush, he was obliged to let out the line, though resistingly, until he let go of it altogether.

"Well, that peg's a good one, and well stuck in, that's a comfort. Pull on, my hearty; you wont be quite so lively next time I get hold of you. Now, Jack," he cried, a moment after, "lay hold as you did before, when I raise the line, and then help me up again, quick."

Jack did so, and again Bob knelt, and then rose to his feet with the line in his hand. The struggles of the trout were not so vehement this time, though still strong enough to require a little circumspection on Master Bobby's part. But as soon as the trout began decidedly to yield, his captor began to act with proportionate decision in pulling him in, and in less than half a minute, trusting entirely to his strong tackle, lifted his gasping prey, and laid it upon the short grass. 'Twas a noble trout, of nearly four pounds weight.

"And he will have a noble fate," punned Bob, "if the Doctor will have him. At all events, we'll ask him, Jack. But how about the time? By Jove, I'd forgotten that! Come along, Jack, we must cut it like bricks!"

Jack, who had got his egg-box slung again, and the line-bag ready, while Bob was disposing of the trout and the line, was ready to start. And away they went schoolwards, as hard as they could get along with the weight they had to carry. However, before they had gone a mile, they heard the fine old clock at Elmdon striking four; after which they took it more gently. They reached the school in time, not only to be fully ready for the bell, but to have ten minutes besides to arrange their fern and their trout, before asking the Doctor to look at them. At seven o'clock the wished-for opportunity presented itself, and they asked the Doctor if he could spare them five minutes to look at something they had got.

"Willingly," was his answer. "Where is it? and what?"

"In our study, sir. It's a fern. I'll fetch it in a moment," said Bob, who knew the Doctor liked short and decided answers to his questions. He was but a few seconds gone before he returned, bringing with him from the little apartment which was the joint den of himself and his

cousin, the fern in one hand and the trout in the other.

"Why, you don't call that a fern, Benson. Where did you get it? He's a splendid fellow, indeed. I have not often seen a finer anywhere."

"Please, sir, we caught it in the pool below Swallowfoot Streams. We'd set a line there while we went up Hagley Brook. Please, sir, would you mind taking it?"

The Doctor smiled, and said he wouldn't mind the least; but had they any right to fish there?

"Oh, yes, sir," said Bob. "The gamekeeper gave me leave two months ago to fish anywhere in Sir Cuthbert's part of the Whitwater. And he said, if I set a line or two sometimes I should not do any harm. And he showed me how himself, sir; I mean, so as to have a chance to catch a trout."

"Well, now for the fern—is that it? Why, Benson, you've been lucky to-day; I did not know this grew in the neighbourhood. It's Wilson's filmy fern. Where did you get it?"

Out came the history of the dipper's nest and the discovery of the fern.

"Upon my word, you are two lucky fellows; but to be sure you do what you can to deserve it by perseverance and labour. Any other luck to-day?"

"No, Sir. Only three kingfisher's eggs."

"*Only* three kingfisher's eggs! Why, what would you have? I have been inquiring for two kingfisher's eggs for my nephew's cabinet these two years and couldn't hear of any; and you say '*Only* three' of them."

"Please, Sir, will you take ours?" eagerly asked both boys. "We left two more in the nest, and the birds are almost sure to lay some more; we can easily get others for ourselves."

"No, no, my good lads," replied their master; "I will not take yours. If you don't want the third you have brought, I'll take that willingly, and you can go some day and fetch me another from the nest. It is probable the old hen will lay more. I knew twenty taken in succession out of one nest, one year."

So Doctor Noble had one of the eggs, very nicely blown and dried, handed to him the next day, together with the specimens of filmy fern; all but two or three which Bob had reserved to send to his sister, when he knew what it was. And three days after, having asked the Doctor's leave to go up to the kingfisher's nest and back, they had the gratification of bringing away a second egg for him, and leaving four others in the nest for the birds to hatch and rear.

CHAPTER VI.

Walk the Fourth—The Grove—The Hartstone—The Raven Tree —Wrilton Castle—Goldcrest's Nest—The Lake—Crow's Nest.

At the approach of the next opportunity for a long walk which presented itself, the boys hesitated for some time as to the direction they should take, and the objects they should propose to themselves. Bob was for settling both beforehand, "for," said he, "people who know what they are going to do, and what they are going to do it for, generally seem to do it best and to meet with most success in the end. And people who wait till the time comes when they ought to be doing, before they settle what they mean to do, I have often seen, muddle away half their time with making up their minds, and then making half beginnings."

Jack, who had often lost half of his playtime in this very way, and so knew very well the truth of what Bob was saying, did not feel at all inclined to dispute—or, as boys generally do when one of their

companions ventures on a little philosophy—to laugh at his cousin's "short sermon for the young."

Should they go to the Common and see if the warrener had destroyed the blue hawk's nest? suggested Bob.

"What else could we do there, and what is a blue hawk?" inquired Jack. "I have looked in my bird-book, and I can't find any name like that."

"Oh! the blue hawk is the same as the merlin, I believe. The male merlin has a blue head and a blue back, and a beautiful fellow he is. I believe the colour of his back gives him that country name. As to what else we could do up there, we might find a golden plover's nest, and in those furze thickets we should have a chance of meeting with the whin-chats' and the twites' nests. The meadow pipit, too, is very common on some parts of the Common, and there are always plenty of nests, the keeper told me one day. Then, too, there is that brook which runs down Watery Lane; there is generally a nest or two of the summer snipe's near it, and I know there are two pairs of these birds there this year, for I have seen them."

"And suppose we don't go there, Bob, where else can we go?"

"Why, there is one place you and I have never been to yet;—I mean the old castle. You know Sir Cuthbert, who lives at Wrilton Park, is an old

friend of my father's, and he generally asks me to go there for a couple of days every half year, and I have leave to go all over the pleasure-grounds, and to the lake and castle. And it was only the day before yesterday that I met him as I went down town after twelve, and he stopped and spoke to me, and said he hadn't seen me lately; wasn't I coming soon to see him? And then I asked him if I might take you next time I went to the castle, and if we might look for some starlings and jackdaws' eggs there. He asked who you were, and when I said my cousin, 'Ah! yes,' said he, 'I remember; my old friend Bessy Benson's boy. She married Mr. Edwards. It is a long, long time since I saw her. Well, you must come up to the Park next week, or the week after, and bring your cousin with you. I'll send my groom and the dogcart for you, and speak to Dr. Noble, and let you know as soon as I can fix a day.' I declare I quite forgot to tell you before, Jack."

Jack was so taken up with the idea of the pleasure-grounds and lake, and ruinous old castle, that he did not seem quite so much impressed with the importance of a visit to the Park as many of his schoolfellows would have been; and he was urgent with Bob to settle at once to go to Wrilton Castle on the coming Thursday. Bob, who had a hankering to go there himself,

did not want much pressing; and so, when the time came, they took the road that ran past the church, and, about two miles further on, past the lodge gates of the Park. They did not remain on it very long, however; for on reaching the churchyard, they took the footpath which led through it past the rectory garden, through the meadow which the little Wrill ran through (and thence through the rectory pleasure-garden), and up the little hill the other side at the back of the rectory stables and other buildings. Then they crossed the railway and struck into the lane that led past the Pest-house. But before reaching that lonely building, the lane skirted "the Grove" for nearly half a mile, and through the Grove Bob meant to reach their destination, Wrilton Castle, which stood within what was now the pleasure-grounds—or, as it was generally called, the wilderness—of Wrilton Park. Bob told his cousin on reaching the Grove that there was a good deal of superstition among the country people about this wood; and not a few among their schoolfellows shared in it,—as perhaps was to be expected, since there were not a few day-boys in the school; some the sons of parents who had come to live at Elmdon for the sake of sending their lads to the school; others the sons of gentlemen or professional men belonging to the town.

He remembered, one day last autumn, he was there nutting with half-a-dozen others of "the boys," when sounds like hollow groans were heard, and every boy ran for his life, he said, and never stopped till they had placed two or three fields between them and the Grove. He added, he was as bad as they at first, and had run out of the Grove as fast as any of them; but then he felt so ashamed of himself he was determined he would run no further, and after a minute or two, and with a beating heart, he made up his mind that he would go into the wood again, and make out what the noise was; for it still continued to be heard at intervals, though not so loud as in the wood. "For I did not know," said the lad, "that it might not be somebody who had hurt himself. And once, too, I had seen a boy take a fit in the school, and he made noises very like those I now heard in the wood." So he went on, guiding himself by the sound, and had nearly reached the spot whence it appeared to come, when all at once his courage nearly gave way again at the loud whirring noise made by something rushing out of a thicket close to his side. Not a little ashamed was he of his momentary tremor the next instant, on recognising its cause in a magnificent cock pheasant, which coolly flew up into an oak tree close by, and crowed at the intruder. "I could

not help a hearty laugh at this," he said, "and in that laugh all my fears escaped, and I pushed boldly through the thicket, and there in a bog, nearly suffocated, poor thing, lay a big calf; all black it looked, but that I soon saw was with the mire. It seemed to have been struggling a long time, and was all but exhausted, and those hollow groans, as we thought them, were the moaning lowings it had made in its distress. I soon ran off towards Farmer Langley's—for I knew it must belong to him—though I was almost beat to keep on running for laughing, when I saw some of the boys who had run away the fastest—that great lout Jeff Harvey the chief among them—and who on seeing me re-enter, had gathered up pluck enough to come back into the next field, start off again more helter-skelter than ever, when they saw me running as if for life—big Jeff Harvey running right over poor little 'Miss Boulton,' and never stopping to pick him up again, or indeed so much as to look behind him. As luck would have it, I met Mr. Langley himself on his pony, with one of his men, in the third field from the Grove. I could hardly speak, I was so out of breath; and he was half-inclined to be cross, for I had broken through one of his hedges before his very eyes with so little ceremony; and he had had a good deal of trouble that way with three or

four of 'our fellows' more than once. But when he understood from me what was the reason I was so out of breath, he said—

"'I beg your pardon, young gentleman, for being rude to you. But I was vexed at the loss of this very calf, which has been missing ever since yesterday, and it is one I set a deal of store by; and I did not like to see my hedges broke before my very eyes. Will you please to go in at the Farm, and sit down and cool yourself, till I get back. I should take it kindly if you would.'

"No, thank you, sir, not now," I answered; "I'll go back with you, and see you get the calf out."

"'Why 'tisn't a calf rightly; it's a year-old. But you'll get more out of breath and hotter than ever; for, from what you say, Jem and I mustn't let the grass grow under our feet.'

"I can keep up with you," I said; "and besides, I know exactly where the calf is, and you do not."

"'Thank you, sir; that's right again.'

"Very few words more were said, and in ten minutes time the farmer, and Jem, and I were standing by the calf safe out of the mire, but quite unable to stand. And that's the end of as good a ghost story as many that I have heard. I think they all might be spoiled with just such another ending as my calf, if there wer'n't so many Jeff Harveys in the world."

Jack appeared quite absorbed with the attention he gave to the former part of this narrative; and to tell the truth, being of rather an imaginative temperament, felt very ready, on leaving the bright sunlight for the comparative gloom of the wood, to indulge a little superstitious fear on hearing it hinted that some people fancied it was "haunted," and was rather disappointed than otherwise, at being obliged to laugh at Jeff Harvey's discomfiture, and the *denouement* of the mired calf.

"What made folks think the place was 'uncanny?'"

"Oh!" said Bob, "I dare say it was the neighbourhood of the Pest-house, and the ruins of the Castle on the other side. I know many people would not go by the Pest-house, after dark, on any consideration; nor yet through the Churchyard. And there are several old tales about shocking things that happened in the Castle, hundreds of years ago. In a few minutes, we shall come to the Hart-stone. They say that was put up where a famous white hart, that had baffled everybody who had hunted it for years, was killed by the two sons of the then Lord; that the young men quarrelled about which of them had given the fatal wound; that the quarrel ran so high, they fought then and there, and so fiercely, that before the forester who was with them could in-

terfere, one of them was dying, and the other so badly wounded, that though he lingered on for many months afterwards, yet he died of his hurts just within the year, and was buried a year, to a day, after his brother. And it was always said after that, that both those unhappy young men 'walked' at night round the scene of their death, when that day came round each year, with their bloody swords and gory wounds. And here we are, at the 'Hart-stone,'" he cried, as they came on to a sort of treeless level at the corner of the Grove, and saw the Castle turrets rising above the wooded banks of a ravine about a mile further on; but the prominent object in the foreground was a grey stone, about six feet high, rough and unhewn, and now covered, in places, with lichens, and showing evident tokens of great antiquity. "And there," he added, "is the Raven-tree. Tradition says a pair of ravens have built in a tree hereabouts for hundreds of years. That tree is known to have been occupied by them for more than thirty years. A large bough which had a pile of nests, one above another—if each year's repairs, rather than building, can be called a nest at all—nearly five feet thick, fell or was broken out, one stormy night about ten years ago; and since then they have built where you now see the nests. See what a heap it is, and I can see the old lady's tail sticking

out. A boy once climbed up and had just got within reach of the nest—he had a sort of staff slung to his wrist to beat off the ravens with if they attacked him, and they did seem very much inclined to do so, the keeper told me—when Farmer Langley, knowing something was wrong by the outcries of the two birds, came up to yonder corner on his pony, and he wasn't long in finding his way under the trees, and letting the lad know that if he touched the nest, he, Farmer Langley, would give him such a dusting—and he cracked his horsewhip as he said so—as he would not forget for his life. Mr. Langley is almost as particular about them as Sir Cuthbert Graham; and *he* says he'd as soon have the old Castle pulled down as the raven's nest destroyed."

Jack was curious to know more about the raven,—how many eggs it laid, and other particulars of that kind. Bob told him four or five, and that usually they bred very early; that they always drove away their young as soon as they were able to shift for themselves; that they were believed to attain a great age, and were now most commonly met with in rocky and inaccessible places, having, like some other birds, been very much lessened by the destruction of their nests, and the war waged on them by the race of gamekeepers. He added, that he had heard they often had one

or more eggs addle, and that, when the young were flown and the old ones had quitted the nest for the year, he should ask if he might get up the tree and examine the nest, in case there was one this year: a plan which we may add here, he, a few weeks afterwards, carried into execution, and was rewarded for it by the acquisition of an egg, none the worse as a specimen, but very disagreeable to blow. Leaving the Hart-stone and the Raven-tree, they issued from the Grove by climbing over a dry wall which had some long stones let through it so as to form a kind of steps to get over by, and then proceeded to scramble down the side of the ravine nearest to them, and cross the little brook which brattled along at the bottom, running into the lake which received the Wrill two or three hundred yards lower down. On the sort of promontory between this brook and the Wrill, and rising not less than one hundred to one hundred and twenty feet above those streams, stood the Castle. The bank facing the point at which they came in sight of the Castle and descended, was very steep and in places precipitous; but generally affording space and earth for not only brushwood to find root, but for many trees, and some of them very fine, to grow and thrive. They had no great difficulty therefore in climbing this. On the other side, above the Wrill, the case would

have been very different. There, there was a sheer descent from the edge of the cliff to near the bottom, and the only approach to the Castle from the direction of the mansion was at a point where the other, that is, the southern bank—there as rocky and precipitous as that on the north-side—approached within four or five yards of it. Over this chasm a bridge had been thrown, connecting the Castle precincts with the wilderness. At all other points, however, the southern bank sloped away, not gently, but still gradually, down to the edge of the Wrill, leaving grassy glades here and there, and in other places showing thickets of indigenous shrubs and trees, occasionally alternating with clusters of foreign growth. Among others, Norwegian spruces and silver spruces were seen, reaching magnificent dimensions ; and several American fir-trees grew grandly enough. But the boys had not much attention to give to such details as these on reaching the Castle, of which the keep was entire and the barbican and flanking towers little the worse for dilapidation. The principal parts of the main building, however, were utterly ruinous. Here they could make out the great hall, and there some smaller apartments. Beneath again, were vaulted rooms, which of course were supposed by the country antiquarians to have been dungeons.

The walls, too, where there had been need of fortification, on the only side unprotected by nature, were more or less perfect. There they had been very strong and thick; and the towers at either end were tolerably perfect, as were the winding staircases in each of them.

Bob left Jack to amuse himself here, while he himself ran on to the gardener's house, just at the garden extremity of the wilderness, to get the key of the thick door which gave admission to the keep. Jack climbed up one of the staircases, peeping out of the narrow slits, which did duty for windows, as he reached them in succession, and came to a floor which required very cautious treading,—so broken and treacherous was it,—and issued at a small vaulted doorway which had evidently communicated with the parapet of the external defence; but it was broken away a few feet from the tower. Then he tried to ascend a little higher, as the stairs still went winding up; though the floor above he saw had utterly given way. At the top of the stairs he found a sort of landing in a kind of semicircular recess, with loopholes opening in two directions. He had scarcely put his head above the last step, when a great fluttering and flapping ensued, as half a score birds hastily endeavoured to make their exit through the loopholes. He saw they were of three sorts, and in

his haste, imagined the larger black ones were crows. Divers holes in the wall he saw, and pieces of stick and straw poking out of them; while sundry chirpings and squeakings assured him there were young birds not far off. Greatly stirred with the hope of securing some eggs before Bob's return, he proceeded to investigate the contents of all the holes—about five—within his reach. The first he put his hand into contained four callow nestlings. But of the other four, no less than three contained eggs. In two of them, the eggs, four or five in number, were of a pale blue, a lighter tint than the hedge-sparrow's eggs, and nearly as big as blackbird's eggs; the other two nests contained eggs which he recognised immediately, being no other than common sparrow's eggs. Two of the blue eggs he deposited carefully in a corner, and then looked about to see how he could contrive to reach more of the holes. He thought if he could get up into one of the openings, and were to reach up so as to catch hold of a projecting stone with one hand, with the other he might succeed in exploring at least two more of the nest-containing receptacles. After one or two efforts, and barking one of his knees, and the knuckles of one hand rather severely in the process, he at length succeeded; and just as he heard Bob's lusty "Jack, I say Jack, where are you?"

he was enabled to call out, "Here, old fellow, up at the top of the tower, with a handful of eggs."

Bob ran up the stone steps as quickly as their nature and the light permitted, just in time to see Jack getting down from his standing-place, and finishing the business rather more quickly than he intended, by taking a very abrupt seat on the stone landing-place, rather to the discomfiture of his stern-framings.

"Up again, old fellow; none the worse, I say?" was his greeting, as he helped his cousin up from his involuntary seat.

"No, not much," he rather hesitatingly said, as he rubbed himself rather feelingly; "and what's more, both the eggs are safe."

One he had held in his hand safely, spite of his bump, and the other was in his mouth.

"Well done, old fellow; why, you've got a couple of jackdaw's eggs, and—" seeing Jack stoop to take up the other two he had laid aside before beginning his clamber—"as many starling's eggs, I declare. You're coming it strong in my absence. But what's in there? That isn't a starling's nest, I know."

"No, it's not," replied Jack; "it's a sparrow's. I've had my hand in there; and there too," as Bob looked at another hole.

They now placed these eggs safely in the box and

descended the staircase. Retracing their steps to the keep, Bob put the key in the door, and after a few efforts succeeded in opening it. To get to this door they had to go up an external flight of several stone steps, and on entering, a turn to the left brought them upon a winding staircase, which conducted downwards to the basement story, as well as upwards to the two floors above, and thence to the platform over all, which commanded a very wide prospect of the surrounding country. The entrance story was much loftier than the story below, and occupied the whole interior space of the building; and the vaulted and groined roofs, and stone floors, and elaborately carved circular arches, were regarded with great curiosity by Jack. The story next in succession seemed to have been the principal apartment of all. It was called the Armory, or sometimes, Bob said, the Hall of Audience. It was a noble apartment about forty feet by thirty-three, exclusive of the space occupied by a gallery which ran round it. And its height from the floor to the apex of the great arch which extended across and supported the upper part, was more than twenty feet, and five or six more to the ceiling. This part of the building was very much decorated, and the bases and capitals of the pillars showed most elaborate ornaments, no two of them being alike. There was a

great quantity of armour at the Park, Bob said, and old weapons of many different sorts, which Sir Cuthbert had told him had once hung on the walls in this very room. But what struck Jack with the most surprise was the great thickness of the walls; nearly thirteen feet through at the bottom and more than nine feet at the top. And Bob bade him observe that the east wall, for some reason or other, was a foot thicker than the others. The whole height of the building, at least of the square turrets at the corners before they were so much damaged at the top, must have been nearly 120 feet. As it was, the main building with its battlements thrown down, was nearly 110 feet high, and no doubt the turrets rose higher than it.

The two boys lingered long about this interesting old tower, and then, reluctantly descending, Bob closed the door and both went over the bridge into the wilderness. Jack wandered down one of the slopes amid the trees and shrubs towards the Wrill, while his friend ran on to return the key; and here he was overtaken by him on his return. Passing on beneath some spruce firs, Bob suddenly uttered a cry of delight:

"Oh! Jack, only look—what a beautiful little nest."

And so it was, indeed. Neatly woven of fine moss and lichens on the exterior, interwoven with

wool and spiders' webs, it hung suspended beneath one of the spreading fir branches, towards its end, being supported by having some of the lateral twigs as it were woven into its framework :—lined with soft small feathers, it contained no less than nine of the most delicate little eggs conceivable. Jack's delight was more than equal to Bob's, and it required the exertion of all his kindly feeling towards living creatures in general, and birds in particular, and of his power of self-denial, to refrain from cutting the branch, and taking it, with the nest attached just as they had found it, home with him. Bob's rhetoric and his own good feeling prevailed however, and, contenting themselves with the abstraction of the usual two eggs, they left the nest unhurt They were rewarded by seeing the little gold-crest return to its temporary home, and resume her seat upon the remaining eggs before they left, after having most carefully packed their spoils in soft cotton wool.

Crossing the Wrill by some stepping-stones a short distance above the point at which it entered the lake, they skirted the foot of the precipice beneath the castle till they reached the shore of the lake. The walking here, for some distance, was very laborious, from the large masses of rock which had fallen down from above, and which had large quantities of tangled briars and brambles

and brushwood growing upon and among them. However, they made their way on—though with some difficulty, and after a good deal of perseverance—till they passed over the 150 yards or so of shore which lay between the mouth of the Wrill and the other brook. Once there, their difficulties ceased. The sheet of water lay spread out before them in all its beauty; and Jack had time and leisure to notice not only that three varieties of the swallow tribe were busily taking their insect prey about the lakes, but that there seemed to be a good many waterfowl of various kinds upon it. Bob told him there were; that Sir Cuthbert took much interest in them, and was very careful not to allow them to be disturbed; so that besides several foreign species which he had turned down, many varieties of the British wildfowl either bred there—on those little islets they saw in three different parts of the lake—or paid visits at other times of the year. That very beautiful English bird, the shoveller, Bob had himself seen there, and there were several shieldrakes about it. He believed that a pair of them had once nested in a rabbit burrow on the further side of the lake and brought off eight young ones. But it had only happened once, to Sir Cuthbert's great disappointment. Bob added further, that among the other birds introduced the winter be-

fore last, were a great black-backed gull and a black goose. Sir Cuthbert had obtained both in the course of a week's wildfowl shooting afloat, on the Essex coast. Both were so slightly injured by the shot—no apparent hurt being discernible beyond the damage of the extreme end of the pinion, which disabled them from flying, and only just that—that their captor determined to save them alive, bring them home, and put them down on his lake. He did so, and though the goose was knocked about by the other fowl who were the old denizens of the lake, if he ventured near them, he soon became familiarized with the gardener and his wife, and would approach within a few feet of them for food, which they usually carried for the purpose of encouraging him. As for the gull, his boldness—degenerating almost into impudence—and his voracity were about equal. He soon learned the way up to the gardener's lodge, and paced or pattered along with quick, short steps when excited, on the short grass before the windows. Nothing came amiss to him in the eatable way; mice, young birds, frogs, large slugs, all were snatched up and deposited without effort or ceremony in what must have been a very capacious and accommodating stomach. One day the gardener had killed a rat, not a very large one, to be sure, but still an adult rat. This

he threw to Jack Blackback, as the gull was called, without any thought that he, Jack, would proceed to extremities, but more out of idle curiosity to see what he would think of it. The rat was unceremoniously taken up in the formidable bill and swallowed, tail first. It did not seem to go down easily or comfortably; but go down it did. However, after a minute or two it seemed to strike Master Jack that he could arrange a better stowage for this large morsel, and so the rat was ejected, thrown on the grass, taken up again and swallowed a second time, *head* first, with as little ceremony as before; and, as the event showed, more compatibly with internal comfort.

Bob now drew his friend's attention more specially to the swallows, which were flying about in large numbers, and asked him if he knew them all. Jack said, he knew the forky-tail chimney-swallow very well, and the common martin also; and he supposed those smaller birds, which showed some lighter colour on the back and rump than either of the other species, were sand-martins.

"Just so," said Bob; "and what you cannot see everywhere you may here—I mean the swift, the swallow, the martin, and the sand-martin, all may be seen on the wing at the same glance, and all breeding within a quarter of a mile square. The swallow nests abundantly in the chimneys of

the gardener's lodge and some outhouses at the end of the wilderness, and among the home farm buildings adjacent. The swifts—several pairs, three or four at least—build in the highest parts of the old keep. The martins have numerous nests on the ledges, or rather under them, among those precipitous rocks we came beneath a quarter of an hour ago; and the sand-martins have founded a very extensive and prosperous summer colony in the sandy soil, above an old quarry, the track to which—now almost entirely disused for several years—lies up here, above our heads."

"Oh, let us go and see them," cried Jack. "I have had such a curiosity to see a place where the sand-martin breeds, ever since I read 'Eyes and no Eyes.'"

"Well," said Bob, "if you are not tired of climbing, I am not; but arn't you a little stiff behind?" Bob looked rather malicious as he uttered this query. However, Jack, with a good-humoured twinkle in his eye, contented himself with replying:—

"Never you mind, Bob; I dare say, if the truth were known, you've sat down hard yourself some day or other."

"That I have, old fellow, and no later than last holidays: I was with my brother Ned out shooting, and we were crossing a brook. I jumped down, a

couple of feet or so, on to what I took in my haste for a sloping bed of hard mud or clay, digging my heels well in—in intention at least—that I might not slip forwards into the water. What I took for clay was hard rock, and the nails of my boot-heels coming so fairly on to it, you may judge if I didn't come down with a run. My word, old fellow, I can feel it yet. I'd have given all I possessed to have had a good cry; but though Ned didn't see what was the row, there was a grinning lout of a watcher, carrying the bag and marking, close behind me, and didn't he snigger at my catastrophe? I guess he grinned the other side of his mouth though, half a minute after. He got gingerly down the bank, and came—half bursting with trying not to laugh—to 'help Master Robert out of the water,' he said; for, as I slid down the stone, my legs straight out, like a fellow that's been tripped up in a slide, of course they dabbed slick into the water, till I was brought up, all standing, by the bottom. I got out without his help, and in shaking my legs and stamping my feet—partly to get the water out of my trousers, and partly to dull the sense of my pain—I brought my heel down once (quite by accident, of course,) on his toes. He didn't laugh again for half an hour, by Myton town clock, I'm sure."

By this time Bob had led the way into a very rugged track, much grown up with weeds and brambles, which went obliquely up the hill. Following this in its windings and zigzags, they soon reached a rather extensive platform, with plentiful *débris* strewed about on all sides, originating partly in the effects of time and weather, and partly in the quarrying operations of old times. A smooth face of solid rock, divided by thin seams of softer material into three beds of stone, varying in thickness from five to ten feet, rose up before them; and above this was a further face, not quite so perpendicular as that of the rock beneath, of reddish soil or sand, about five feet thick. And in this were seen countless round holes of apparently some two or two and a-half inches in diameter, and numbers of the sand-martins flying in or out.

"Nests enough, there, my boy," exclaimed Bob, as they rested after their scramble up. "Wouldn't you like to put your hand into one of them?"

"Oh, yes!" answered Jack, "indeed I should. But can't we?"

"I'm afraid it's not to be done at the price," was the discouraging reply. "We could clamber up that corner—at least one of us—and then, if he came to grief, the other that stayed below might pick up the pieces, and report the fracture; and we might, in that way, get our feet on to yonder

ledge, one hand on those projecting roots, and the other into those three or four holes that are within reach. But those holes reach in more than two or three inches. Some will be a foot, others nearer two, in depth; and I don't think, if we were sitting at ease in arm-chairs just before them, we should at that rate succeed in penetrating their interesting mysteries. No, Jack, we must leave them alone in their safety; but if we go up to the common again soon, I know a sand and gravel pit, not far out of our road, which contains some nests that are accessible from above, and though we have a couple of eggs, we'll see if we cannot open one up for you."

The two boys now descended from the quarry, crossed the brook at the bottom of the bank, climbed the one on the other side, and re-entered the grove, about a quarter of a mile below the point at which they had left it on their way to the castle. As they passed on through it, taking short tracks,—known familiarly to few besides the gamekeeper,—from drive to drive, so as to cross to the lower corner on the Elmdon side, Bob's sharp eye detected an unnatural protuberance on one side of a tree not very far from the edge of the grove.

"That's a nest," he said. "It is cunningly put within that broken limb, which makes it look less;

but it's a crow's nest for all that. At all events, I'll see." And accordingly, in less than a minute, he was sufficiently high in the tree to ascertain not only that it was a crow's nest, but contained four eggs. He took one, for they had one already, and as he put it in the case, he said, rather to himself than to his companion, "A crow's nest here—dainty fare for Mr. and Mrs. Blackneb; the young pheasants in the wood, and the ducks' eggs and small swimmers from the lake:—I must tell Banks. Let's see; how can I get him to know the tree? Ah! I see. He must come in by the end of the hedge between Longland's and Three-acres, and the third large tree on the right, 15 yards from the hedge"—stepping it as he spoke; "that'll do exactly."

They now left the wood, crossed the Wrill by an accommodation bridge, uniting the two parts into which it severed a meadow, and walked through a couple of other meadows to the road; trudging along which they reached the Church as the clock pointed to half-past four. In less than ten minutes they were in their study, and had put away their egg-box on its accustomed nail, and proceeded to prepare themselves to be present at roll-call, as soon as the bell should summon them.

CHAPTER VII.

School Examination—Merlin's Eggs—Golden Plover's Nest—Stonechat's, Whinchat's, Common and Mountain-Linnet's Nests—Corn Crake's, Whitethroat's, Longtailed Tomtit's, and Willow Wren's Nests.

THE occasion for their next walk presented itself much sooner than they had any reason to expect. When the school was next assembled, after their return from the excursion recorded in the last chapter,—in the course, that is, of the same evening,—Dr. Noble informed the boys publicly that he had that day received formal notice from the Visitors of Elmdon Grammar School—namely, the Bishop of the diocese and Dr. Healy, the master of St. Hilda's Hall—that they purposed to pay their annual visit of examination on the following Monday.

"We have but short notice this time, my boys," said the doctor in conclusion, "but I have no fear that you will not acquit yourselves well; and I don't believe that many of you would care to have much more time for special preparation."

As he passed Bob in the school-yard, a few

minutes afterwards (the school having just been dismissed for the evening), Dr. Noble said to him—

"I think the bird's eggs haven't interfered with the Latin and Greek; have they, Benson?"

"I hope not, sir. I think I like my work very well, and I haven't lost any places in class."

"No, indeed you have not; and I think at the end of the half-year you will gain several steps. You have given me much satisfaction, Benson, by your general attention and good conduct, as well as by your progress." And then turning to our friend Jack, who had come up as he addressed these last words to Bob, he said—

"You have done very well too, on the whole, and your general conduct I am thoroughly pleased with. You can't do better than—what I am very glad to see you so well disposed to do—make a friend of your cousin."

Passing on, he left the two lads deeply gratified with his kind notice and commendation, and determining they would do their best to deserve it.

"I say, Jack," said Bob, after a few seconds, "we mustn't do the worst on Monday."

"No fear of that, Bob. I only wish I could do as well as you."

Well, the days passed on. Bob and Jack both spent the greater part of their playtime—and

many others of their schoolfellows in the higher forms did the same—in rubbing up anything they thought had got rusty in their school work, and making themselves safe in what they considered doubtful places; and it was remarkable how much Bob, who, to the best of his ability, applied his principle of knowing "what he was going to do, and what he was going to do it for," to his work, had succeeded in getting done; for there were but few points in which he found necessity to begin, as if upon something still rather new and strange.

Monday came at last, and punctually at a quarter-past nine the Bishop and Dr. Healy were ushered into the school; and in a few minutes a real, honest examination commenced, the visitors confining their attention principally to the performances of the three upper classes, and giving comparatively casual observation to the examination of the lower ones, which went on under the immediate superintendence of the Rector of Elmdon—who was, in compliance with the statutes, always requested to be present on the occasion—and the head-master himself. Our friend Bob was specially noticed by the Visitors, not for his brilliancy or any shining scholarship, but for his general accuracy and the readiness with which he produced the results of his reading, or his recollections of what he had learnt in class. They inquired particularly

of the Doctor who he was, after they had left the school, and what were his characteristics; was he not a very attentive and diligent scholar?

Dr. Noble, in his answer, said that Benson was a very promising boy. Attentive he was certainly, and diligent too in the hours allotted to study; but if the inquirer meant, as he rather supposed he did, out of hours—Dr. Healy here assented—certainly not. No boy in the school entered more heartily into all the games, particularly the athletic ones; or more seemed to enjoy them. And then he just glanced at Bob's predilection for natural history, and his rambles in pursuit of this or that object of interest. The secret of his success, he said, was in his energy, and perseverance, and method. Whatever he undertook he put his heart into it. What he did he "did it with his might," said the Doctor, making the allusion reverently. If it were cricket or football, or the acquisition of a new egg, or the capture of a basket of fish; the mastery of a new rule in arithmetic or algebra, or of a problem more difficult than usual; or the complete comprehension of the scope and intention of a passage in his Latin or Greek, the same method, and determination, and perseverance were always brought into play. "He will lead the school," concluded the Doctor, "if he remains here two or three years more. He is very popular

already among his equals in age, and even among some of his seniors. And if God spares his life, he will make not only a rising—but much more than that—a useful man."

Jack came in for no especial notice; but before leaving the school, the Bishop, in a few plain but forcible words, told the boys that the Visitors were quite satisfied with the results of their examination; that in their opinion the school more than maintained its position; and while they, the Visitors, could not but give the scholars credit for their evident efforts to avail themselves heartily of the opportunities for improvement placed within their reach, they could not themselves shut their eyes upon the fact, and it was right that the scholars should know their opinion—the speaker said he did not doubt they all felt the same thing themselves—that in the careful and conscientious superintendence and instructions of their Headmaster, the scholars of Elmdon school enjoyed an advantage not easily to be overrated. He had only further to say, that, with Dr. Noble's permission, there would be, in accordance with immemorial custom, a holiday for the remainder of the day. The hearty cheers which resounded from 180 young throats as he ceased speaking, and which had almost broken out when Dr. Noble's name was mentioned, were a sufficient proof that

the orator had just said what found a response in every heart there.

Jack, on joining Bob as they came out of school, was rather apprehensive they would lose their walk; as the latter, of course, could not ask the Doctor's leave in school, though he had passed close behind him on leaving the room; and now he would be busy with the Visitors, and not to be interrupted.

"Oh! never fear," said Bob; "when the Doctor is too busy to be interrupted he tells the second master to give leave for him to those who are entitled to ask it, and wish to go out; and I saw him speak to Mr. Patten as he passed." And he soon had an opportunity of approaching that gentleman, when he immediately gained the permission he desired.

The two companions had settled on Saturday that they would go up to the Common, if the afternoon on Monday were suitable, and they were able to get off in good time; and Bob had seen the warrener, who had come into the Saturday's market with some young rabbits—the first of the season, and only just big enough for sale, although a very early litter—and had learned from him that he had the three eggs the blue hawk had laid, all safe for himself and his friend; and, further, that he knew where there was a golden plo-

ver's nest, with one egg in it, which he had accidentally walked over the day before. It was therefore arranged that he should meet the lads about one o'clock at the "Longstone:"—as an upright pillar of unhewn stone, believed to be British in its origin, was called. They made all speed to reach the appointed place by the appointed time, but were inevitably a little late, as they did not get out of school till rather after twelve, and then had some preparations to make before starting. The warrener had been on the Common about half an hour, he said, but had had one or two weak places in the wall of the warren to repair, not far from the trackway, so that he had not lost his time. He first produced the three merlin's eggs out of an old tobacco-box, and Bob lost no time in transferring them to his egg-box; and then a screw of blue paper, containing a fine sample of "birds'-eye" from it to the warrener's hand. The warrener, whose own consumption was usually "shag," thought he had much the best of the bargain; an opinion not shared in by Bob, and still less by Jack, who had an immense respect for hawks, and all that belonged to them. They now passed rapidly on to the part of the Common where the plover's nest was situated. Before they had got nearer to it than 300 or 400 yards, they heard the well-known plaintive single

note of the golden plover, and in a minute more one of the birds took a short flight in their direction, and settled on the ground about 100 yards in advance of them, where he continued repeating his cry at very short intervals. This was the male bird, as they saw from the dark, indeed black colour of his breast, as he stood on a little eminence above the general level of the moor, piping plaintively. The hen sat still about 150 yards further on, piping, too, as if in answer to him, but not so incessantly.

"I thought we should not see either of them very near the nest," said the warrener. "The nest is here, rather to our left. Here is the cock on our right, and there is the hen on our right too; and, I'll be bound, a good hundred yards from the nest. And by this time, I'll lay, she has got her four eggs all laid."

As the three drew nearer to the nest, the uneasiness of the two plovers evidently increased. The male made several short flights, and at last came within half gunshot, where he alighted and ran restlessly about; and the hen sat about twenty yards further off. Their piping was now incessant. The warrener, who had marked the position of the nest by its bearings in relation to two thistles and a tuft of rushes, proved to be quite right in his surmise that there would be found to

be four eggs in the nest; which was only a hollow in the ground, barely big enough to contain the eggs, and with the barest apology for a lining, of dry bents or grass. The eggs were fully as large as the pewit's—if anything, a very trifle larger;—not unlike them in general appearance, only perhaps the dark blotches were a little darker than in the pewit's egg. They were also symmetrically arranged, point to point in the centre. No time was lost in placing two of them—very beautiful in the eyes of both boys, as indeed these eggs really are—in the egg-case. And then Jack asked if "the warrener had never seen them on their nest?"

"Why, yes," said he, "I have. But it's when the eggs are very 'hard sat,' and the old one's within a day or two—or a few hours, maybe—of hatching. She'll almost let you tread upon her then; but when the eggs haven't been long laid, they are uncommon wary. They seem to keep watch, and to see you as soon as you come on to the level where their nests are; and I expect, the hen, as soon as her mate gives notice by his whistle, that anybody is nigh, runs quietly off her nest ever so far, and never takes wing from anywhere near it. And you'll see, that as you go away now, they'll follow you by flights of fifty yards at a time—bit by bit like—till you cannot see any

longer where the nest is. And then, they'll pay no more heed to you."

It was just as the warrener said, and very interesting to his companions. He now wished them good-day, and turned to his own occupations. They prosecuted their walk to the furze thickets, and soon got their legs well pricked. Both whin-chats and stone-chats were there, and twice they had seen mountain-linnets as they crossed the common thither. Still, no nest rewarded their search.

"Hang it, Bob," cried Jack at last, his legs smarting, and his hands—unprotected by stout gloves such as his cousin, foreknowing his work, had brought with him—bleeding: "hang it, I say; it's no use; I have looked into twenty bushes, and I have got five times twenty pricks into me, and my hands are bleeding, and never a shadow of a nest have I seen. You might as well look in this old bush"—and as he spoke, he struck the bush near him with an old dead furze stem he had just picked up—"for a nightcap as a nest."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, when a little bird flew out of the very bush he had struck, and alighting on the top twigs of another furzebush about twenty yards off, began to utter, somewhat quickly, a rather sharp, chattering note. The stick was out of Jack's hand in a moment,

and forgetful of pricked legs and bleeding hands, he was deep in the search for the nest he felt so confident must be somewhere in the bush. But in vain did he seek, and his confidence was beginning to ooze out, when Bob, happening to look up, shouted to him—

"Look lower down, Jack; lower down. They don't build so high up in the bushes as that."

'Twas new spirit to him, this hint; and acting upon it instantly, the next moment a glad shout announced his success.

"I have found it. Here it is."

"That's right, old chap; and I've got another, with four eggs."

"And mine's got five in it," replied Jack eagerly.

"Wait a bit, will you, till I can mark mine," responded Bob; "I want to see it."

Bob was soon at his cousin's side, having tied his pocket-handkerchief to the bush where his own nest was, and he almost danced with delight when he exclaimed—

"We are in luck, again, old fellow. Yours is a stone-chat's; mine's a whin-chat's, or furze-chat's, as some call it. Look here. Take a couple of these eggs and bring them along to my nest, and you'll see the difference in a minute. Mine are half as blue again as yours, and are scarcely

speckled at all; while you can see lots of tiny little speckles on your eggs," reaching two eggs as he spoke out of the nest he had found, and close to which they were now standing. "Go it again, Jack," he cried the minute after, having duly secured the four eggs; "we'll have a mountain-linnet's nest yet. I'm sure there are some here; I have heard their call, again and again, the last few minutes. Your luck always comes double you know; starling's eggs first, and then a bump. Isn't that it?"

He jumped lightly out of the way as Jack aimed a blow at him for reminding him, quite unnecessarily, as he said, of his painful mishap the other day. The latter went to work again without delay, using a stick, however, instead of his hands, to push open the bushes; but, it must be confessed, without the slightest thought of really finding another nest; notwithstanding which, his luck really did seem to come double. For to his own vast surprise, having straggled on to a considerable distance from Bob—whose investigations were much more methodical and persevering, and rewarded with the discovery of two more of the stone-chats' nests in the ensuing quarter of an hour—he disturbed another bird from its nest, which proved to be, not really the twite, or mountain-linnet, as he supposed, but the common, or

grey-linnet, or, as it is sometimes called by boys from the colour of its head, the red-linnet. He ran hastily to Bob with his prize; which Bob, after looking at them for a moment, assigned positively to their rightful origin, adding, they would be very useful, as their own specimens were only cast-offs from the museum collection, and imperfect to begin with.

"But a mountain-linnet's nest we must have," he added, "for all that; for I am convinced there are some here, and not far from us."

So saying, he took off his gloves, in order to stow away Jack's eggs; flinging the leathers carelessly down on a rough, benty bank of no great height, near to which he was standing at the moment. Disturbed by the action, or by the fall of the gloves, a small bird started from the side of the bank among a tuft of bents and stunted ling. Bob's eye was instantly fixed on the bird.

"The real Simon Pure," he cried, as it perched on the furze at no great distance—"the mountain linnet itself, at last. Where did it come from, Jack?"

Jack thought from somewhere near where the gloves lay, but he had not seen the bird the instant it rose, and could not say exactly. A few minutes' search, however, disclosed the nest, and two twite's eggs were speedily added to the rest.

Bob was quite as willing as his cousin now, to leave the furze brakes; and a moment's consultation ensued as to whether they should go on into the marsh, or return by the footpath and look into the partridge's nest they had found nearly three weeks since, or try and make a straight course to the brook, in the vicinity of which Bob thought they had a chance of finding the nest of the common sand-piper, or summer snipe. It was soon decided that they should take the footpath to the place where the partridge's nest was, and from thence strike across the fields to the brook. They therefore quickly crossed the warren, seeing a couple of snipes rise as they passed the pools—both of which began to bleat as they rose high enough in the air—and with no loss of time found themselves close to the partridge's nest. This time Jack, as well as Bob, succeeded in detecting the old bird on it.

"See, Jack," said Bob, as they passed on, "she's safe as yet, with, I dare say, fourteen or fifteen eggs under her. I wish you luck with your brood, my dear," he added, nodding back in the direction of the sitting bird.

They now crossed or skirted three or four fields, until they came to the upper streams which supplied the brook running along Watery Lane. Bob felt they were now engaged on rather a wildgoose

chase; as he knew enough of the summer snipe's habits to be quite aware the nest might be some distance away from the waters the birds themselves mainly frequented. And as they walked down the stream for nearly half a mile, seeing first a single sand-piper, and then, a few minutes after, two together—but no sign of a nest—he inferred that the mate of the single bird they had seen was probably sitting, and if so, her nest was certainly not near the brook; while, as to the whereabouts of the nest belonging to the pair, they had not the slightest clue to it. They therefore gave up the quest as hopeless. They were now within one field of Watery Lane, and as they reached the gate opening into that last field, they saw, coming along the cart-track with the evident purpose of passing through the gate, a labouring man with a team of two horses in an empty cart. Stopping to hold the gate open for him, Bob and the carter recognised each other simultaneously as the latter came up to the gate,—

"Why, Jem, is that you?" was Bob's greeting; and,

"Young Measter, I's very glad to see yer," the carter's.

Jack soon comprehended from the interchange of question and answer which ensued, that this was the veritable Jem of the mired calf history:

that he had left Farmer Langley, and was now working for Farmer Raven. Hearing Jem ask if "young measter wor as keen arter buds' nests as he used to be?" Jack listened with increasing interest, which was not the least damped on hearing, in response to Bob's answer, "Yes, he was,"—"Well then, coom along a bit wi' me, and I can show yer one o' them craker's nests. I seed it yesterday as I was a-mowing o' clover hard by here; and I's going for anither load now; and I knows of a nettle-creeper's nest, and a bottle-tom's, nit far off. An' cow-boy, I heered him say yesterday, he'd found an oven-builder's in the pightle."

Much of this harangue was Greek to Jack, who only comprehended that these queer names were country names for birds; but what these birds were he couldn't even guess. However, they went on with civil Jem to the adjoining field, where he had to mow a load of the early clover for the farm-horses' provender; and, after he had cut an armful to put before his horses, to keep them "quite," as he said, they went about thirty yards farther up by the side of the unmown clover, and then were delighted to see what Bob recognised as a landrail or corncrake's nest, with eight speckled eggs in it. Jem said it would be no use leaving six of them, as the clover would be mowed the day after

to-morrow, and then the nest *must* be destroyed. So as no object would be gained by leaving them, they took the rest as well. He then turned aside to the fence, which lay about fifty yards distant, and there, in a bed of nettles and other rank herbage, but not far above the ground, he showed them another nest with five eggs in it, and which he called a nettle-creeper's. The nest was made of dry grass loosely twisted together, lined with a little horse-hair, and some which apparently once grew in a cow's tail. Bob thought they were a whitethroat's nest and eggs, but did not feel at all sure. He took care to secure a couple.

"I fund it yesterday," said Jem, "when I come here to cut a stick, for I left my whip at whoam; and as I went along here I seed that," pointing to an oval mass in a thorn bush, tolerably well hid by the broad leaves of some brambles which thrust themselves up through the bush; "I reckon it's a bottle-tom's."

Bob knew the long-tailed tom-tit by that name, but if he had not, he would instantly have recognised the nest. A most beautiful oval structure, neatly and strongly compacted of mosses, and wool, and spiders' web, and with a feather to serve as a sort of door to the entrance at the upper part of one side. Jem was going to cut the bush, on which the nest was built, that they might have

it just as it was; but the boys would not hear of that, and, rather to his discomfiture, contented themselves with taking two only of the eight delicate little pinky-spotted white eggs it contained.

"Now," said he, as they left him to go to his work, "you goo up to the farm, and you'll see the cow-'us jest facing yer as you goo into the farmyard. Goo straight up to the door, and you'll see cow-boy cleaning it out, afore he drives the cows in; you ask him to show yer the oven-builder's neest."

Mr. Raven's farm was very little off Watery Lane, and so they bent their steps thither with all speed, after thanking Jem for his good-will and help. They found the cow-boy just going to drive the cows in, and he took them directly to the pightle: and on the upper part of the mossy bank of one of its surrounding fences, amid a few stubs (whence the brushwood had been cut years before), and a plentiful growth of long stems of grass, and not raised at all above the ground, they saw a grass and moss-made dome-covered nest, lined with feathers, and in it half a dozen beautiful little eggs, but much larger than the bottle-tom's, white, speckled—and most at the larger end—with pale red, which Bob pronounced to be the willow-wren's. Bob asked the cow-boy if he could spare them a couple of the eggs.

"Ees, to be sure," replied that worthy; "all on 'em, if yer like."

"No," said Bob, "two will do. But aren't you going to take the others?"

"Noa, I ain't," said the boy; "they're no use to I. She may hatch 'em if you don't want 'em."

Bob and Jack thanked the lad very warmly, and after a diligent rummage in their pockets, clubbed together the magnificent sum of twopence halfpenny, which they offered to him.

"Noa, noa," said he; I do'ent want nought." However, as they pressed it on him, he eventually took it, with a good pull at his forelock and a "Thank'ee kindly, measters."

Rejoicing greatly over this most successful—as to the number of eggs obtained—of all their excursions, they returned to the school, and met the Doctor at his own door, just returning from the station, whither he had been to see the Visitors off by the 4.15 train.

"Well, what luck to-day?" he cried as they came up.

The box was straightway lifted off the shoulder that bore it, and placed open before him.

"Upon my word, a goodly afternoon's spoils. But come into my study, and let's look at them more leisurely. You've nearly half an hour yet to roll-call. Well, what do you call them all?"

Bob proceeded to name them in the order they had got them, until he came to the last four, and then he very demurely said,—"And those eight are craker's, and these two nettle-creeper's, and these bottle-tom's, and these last oven-builder's."

The Doctor laughed. "I see," he said, "you didn't find these for yourselves,—some countryman told you of them; or did you know those names before?"

"I knew bottle-tom before, sir; but not the others. But is the nettle-creeper the same as the whitethroat, sir?"

"I think there is no doubt," replied the Doctor, "that the eggs you have there are whitethroat's eggs: but I believe the name nettle-creeper, like most provincial names, is very loosely applied, and that it includes the garden-warbler, the common and the lesser whitethroats, and perhaps one or two others of the same tribe, whose habits and nests more or less resemble those of the whitethroat. I dare say you know that bottle-tom has a variety of other names; that oven-builder, even, is sometimes applied to him, and that he shares another name with the willow-wren. Bum-barrel is one of his names, and another I have heard in Suffolk, and of which I can make out neither the orthography, nor the derivation, nor the meaning, is mum-ruffin. Only one Eng-

lish bird lays smaller eggs than these, and that is the gold-crest; unless indeed the fire-crest is taken to be another species, and not a mere variety of the gold-crest. You are not very likely, I doubt, to get those delicate little eggs in this part of the country."

"Oh! sir," chimed in both boys, "we got two of them the other day,—Thursday, I mean."

"Did you, indeed? Where? I did not know they bred anywhere near."

"We found the nest on one of the fir trees, in the wilderness, at Wrilton Park, sir, and my cousin wanted sadly to have nest and all. It was so beautiful."

Dr. Noble, on hearing they had been to Wrilton Castle, asked them several questions about their explorations, and told them several curious particulars about the castle, its architecture and history; and lending them the "County History," which contained, he said, "a meagre but correct account, as far as it went, of the Castle,"—dismissed them to prepare for the sound of the evening bell.

CHAPTER VIII.

Walk the Sixth—Sandpiper's and Magpie's Nests—Bush Magpie and Tree Magpie—Nests of the Nuthatch, Ringdove, Woodcock, Stockdove, and Spotted Woodpecker.

On the following Thursday afternoon, the two lads started from the school-gate about a quarter-past twelve. Their discussion, on the previous day, as to what should be the direction of their walk, and its objects, had been much shortened and abruptly settled by the receipt of a note, very neatly written and correctly spelt and expressed, from their friend the gamekeeper, in which he said, that if "Master Robert and his friend had nothing better to do the next day, and would come either to the end of the marsh nearest the common, to be there a little before two; or, to his house" (which lay close to a cross road running up from the Whaldon-road, at about three miles from Elmdon, over the Wassett, to Turley), "about one, he had several things he thought they would like to see, besides a few eggs which he

had fallen in with and had reserved for them." They decided, however, that they had not time to reach his house by one, as it was a good, hard hour's walk. They would therefore go to the marsh, and would spend the hour they would have to spare before the gamekeeper joined them at the rendezvous, in going about the lower part of Fox Spinney, and seeking for any of the wood-building birds' nests they might be fortunate enough to meet with. As they went along Watery-lane, Bob suggested, that instead of going on as usual till they turned off into the lane that led to the Turley-road, they should take up the cart-track they had seen Jem on on Monday, and endeavour to make their way through the fields in such a way as to cut off the corner and strike the Turley-lane, near where the foot-path led out of it to Fox Spinney. He said he thought they could do it without walking over the growing crops or breaking the farmer's hedges; for he knew the main stream of the little brook they had walked along when seeking the summer snipe's nest, ran nearly up to the point he named, and if they kept pretty close to it he was sure they could do no harm. They directed their steps accordingly, and as they were trudging briskly along, Jack asked if Banks were the principal gamekeeper on Sir Cuthbert Graham's estate, and if he were, why he did not live nearer the park.

"Why, I believe the reason is," answered Bob, "that the most important part of the estate for game is up here. There is another wood about two miles more Whaldon way, larger than Fox Spinney, and then there is Turley Moor, which has a great many grouse on it; and six or seven thousand acres of inclosed land besides, which is full of partridges. But the property does not go a yard beyond the park, in the Saxby direction, and the Grove is the only preserve that way; besides which, at the back of Elmdon, there is not much land belonging to Sir Cuthbert. The bulk of it lies much more this way. So there is a watcher, or under-keeper, who lives in one of those nice cottages, about half a mile beyond the Church. And the keeper lives up there, where I showed you; and besides, he has another under-keeper living somewhere about Turley, besides lots of watchers, in the game season."

While Bob was giving this explanation, they had arrived at a point a little higher than that at which they had struck the brook on the Monday. Bob interrupted himself rather suddenly as he uttered the last words, interjecting a rather sharp "Hallo!" —the next moment stooping a little, and appearing to be engaged in scrutinizing some object on the further bank of the little stream very closely.

"I saw something move in that hole, Jack. I

am certain of it. But I don't think it was a water-rat. I'll see, though."

And jumping lightly across on to a bare place about a couple of yards below, he proceeded to make his way as gently as he could, to just above the suspicious hole. Here, however, he was saved the trouble of any further investigation by the darting forth from the hole in question of a smallish bird, which flitted rapidly down the stream. Both boys recognised it at the same moment, and both exclaimed, "A summer snipe." Bob was down on his knees in a moment, and in his eagerness, in some danger of toppling over head first into the water. But recovering himself, and looking over so as to be able to see into the hole, he cried to Jack,—

"All right, my lad. 'Tis the nest, and four eggs in it too. Just a little moss and dry leaves, that's all for 'em to lie on. It's lucky she moved, or I shouldn't have seen it, hid like that by that dockweed. Aren't they beauties?" he continued, as he drew out two of the peculiar shaped eggs laid by all that tribe of birds, very much pointed at the smaller end. "And what whoppers, too! Why the bird isn't much bigger than a lark, and look at these eggs, more than twice as big and as heavy as the lark's eggs."

"What's the reason, Bob, that all these eggs,

such as the golden plover's, and snipe's and pewit's, and now these sandpiper's eggs, are so big in proportion to the bird that lays them?"

"Indeed, I can't tell," was Bob's answer to this inquiry. "I've read somewhere that it is because nature intends the young ones to have room for growth, so as to come forth in a much more helpful state than those of such birds as roost in hedges; that thus they are better able to get out of danger,—which is much greater on the ground than in among the branches of a tree or the twigs of a bush,—by being able to run quickly almost as soon as they are hatched. But I don't understand it, for all that"—Bob went on—"the young partridges run as soon as they are hatched, with the very egg-shell sticking to 'em sometimes, I've heard, and the eggs they come out of are only as big as snipes' eggs, as we noticed the other day; and yet the old partridge is four or five times as big—at least, as heavy—as the old snipe. And then again, the young waterfowl all swim nearly as soon as they are hatched; and little puff-balls of dabchicks, and water-hens, and coots, dive before they are many hours old, and so on. And the eggs of water birds in general are not at all large in proportion to the birds that lay them. In fact, the eggs of many of the swimmers, not to say all of them, are small in proportion. And

those willock's eggs too, Jack, you know—what big ones they are—very near as big as a goose's egg; bigger than some of the varieties of wild-geese lay; and the willocks or guillemots themselves not one-sixth part of the size of the geese. According to the supposition, then, the young 'willys' ought to come out, when hatched, up to all sorts of dodges; 'to fend for themselves' like bricks, as Scotch Mary says. But instead of that, they sit motionless on the narrow ledge where they are hatched till their mother, some day getting tired of feeding her great lazy, voracious babby, takes it on her back, and, flying down to the sea, 'whummles' it in. No, no, Jack, that's not the reason why the eggs of the waders generally are so big: and I am sure I don't know what is."

Delivering himself thus, Bob stopped about twenty yards from a fence, or rather a hedge, the end of which abutted on the brook, and which was of considerable thickness, and had grown into bushes ten or twelve feet high in many places, and said to his companion,—

"There's a nest, and a big 'un, in yonder bush; but I doubt it's an old one."

"Let's go and see," cries Jack, and was crossing directly to it.

"Gently, Jack; don't tread the corn;" and, walking round the corner instead, they soon stood

under the nest; which, however, was not an old one; as they saw immediately on being able to put the bushes a little on one side, and look in. "Thorns in our legs, scratched hands, and torn jackets will be the order of the day for us here, my boy, unless we look sharp and mind our eyes, or else give it up, which perhaps you would prefer, Jack. You know you don't like pricked legs and bleeding hands. I say, are your wounds healed yet, my poor boy?"—the last few words being uttered with intense compassion in his tones.

Jack's abrupt reply was—"You be hanged, Bob; you're always chaffing a fellow. I think you are afraid yourself."

"Well, perhaps I am. But I say, Jack, how *are* we to get at this nest?"

When Jack looked a little more closely at the task before him, he saw it was anything but an easy one. The magpie that built the nest—for he knew directly he saw it near enough that it was a magpie's nest, albeit built in a bush, while all he had seen before had been built in trees—had deserved to be called a crafty bird. The bush was a particularly thick whitethorn plant, of particularly spiteful growth; the thorns on it were not only long and sharp, but very numerous. It was no easy matter to get within reach of the main stems except by creeping in on hand and

knee. The outer twigs of course would not bear the weight of a cat, much more of a stout boy; and the only entrance through the strong complicated dome or superstructure of the nest was on that side of the bush which presented the most, and the most difficult, obstacles to the would-be plunderer. Jack looked and looked, but could suggest nothing besides creeping underneath and then rising in what he thought looked like a hollow in the bush near the stem. "Try it," said Bob, concisely. Jack did, and succeeded in raising himself on to his knees without much trouble; but his cap was caught by a meddlesome thorn just above his head, and he didn't find it easy to set it free. Still he thought he had succeeded, and so he had, though only to get it caught again as soon as he moved, as he presently found; for, on trying to raise himself to his feet, he found his cap scrubbing hard down one cheek and ear and a thorn insinuating itself very unpleasantly at the back part of his scalp, from which when he endeavoured to get himself free, he found he didn't mend matters much by pushing against another, which seemed desirous to try conclusions with his cheek-bone. Withdrawing himself with more desperation than caution, he brought back a piece of the latter in his cheek, and snatching down his cap, which hung suspended on the thorn that

wooed it so winningly, rather impatiently, he tore a neat three-cornered slit in it. He emerged at last with a redder face and less confidence than he went in with. But he joined in Bob's laugh with great good humour, asking him to take the thorn out of his cheek as gently as he could; which was easily done, there being a good handle to it outside the flesh.

"Well, Jack," said he, "we must leave it, I suppose. And yet it looks very much as if it had four or five eggs in it. What's it to be, old fellow?"

"Why get it, Bob, to be sure, even if we have to go to Raven's farm for a ladder."

"Well, Jack, I think I can get it if you'll bear a hand, without going quite so far for a ladder. Did you notice the brook at the bottom of the hedge, where we left it just now, how shallow it was? And did you notice that sort of frame that was hung there to prevent the cattle walking out of one field into the next through the shallows? I don't know if we can get that. If we can, it will do for a ladder."

Jack jumped with delight, and ran off full speed to the brook. Bob came rather more leisurely; and, looking carefully at the hinges by which the water-gate was hung, shook his head, saying,—

"I was afraid so. Don't you see, Jack, these crooks turn different ways. That one with the

nut on it was put in after the gate was put in its place. That cock won't fight, unless we take this thick rail and all; and that won't be easy. See, it's fast at this end to this tree with three ten-penny nails."

Poor Jack despaired again now of anything nearer than Mr. Raven's ladder; but, looking at Bob's face, he saw a knowing smile there, which he interpreted into "I'm not beat yet;" and eagerly cried, "What is it, Bob? I'm sure you've another plan."

"Aye, Jack; but it will make us sweat."

"Never mind that; anything rather than be beat."

"Well, then, we must go back to the last hedge we came over. There was a hurdle there which looked strong enough. I think we can manage to bring it here, and take it back when we've done with it; and once on the top of it, we shall do."

Eagerly enough did they run to the hedge. Toilingly along they returned with their burden, and quite willing was Jack to lay his end on the ground at the foot of the bush previous to making the last effort of rearing it up lengthwise and placing it properly. But before doing this, Bob proceeded to cut a stout hazel stick about two feet long, and to tie it securely with twine, which he took from his pocket—he said he always took a coil with

him, it was so often useful on these occasions—across the longitudinal bars of the hurdle, about half-way between the strong side-rail, and the transverse bar (applied to strengthen the hurdle) nearest to it. "For it won't be so easy," he explained, "when the hurdle is pressed against the yielding bush by my weight, to get from this bar to that at one step."

The hurdle was now reared and set against the bush. They saw directly that it would answer, though Bob would have to mount upon the side-rail, which was now uppermost. He found his stick of immense assistance. Indeed, it was doubtful if he could have managed the last step without it. Then, carefully separating the bush with his gloved left hand, and leaning on against it the while with all his weight—his jacket buttoned quite up to his chin to obviate thorns, and Jack holding the hurdle below very firmly, according to his instructions—he succeeded in inserting his right hand without much damage except a few scratches on his wrist, and bringing it out again with three out of the six eggs it contained;—taking three instead of two in case of accident amid the strong, sharp thorns. The labour was now achieved; to descend was easy, and the make-shift ladder was soon replaced, and the egg-box taken up and re-slung. They had spent more time

than they had bargained for over this nest, but still Bob thought they had time to go on into the Fox-Spinney as they had planned; and they walked rapidly on in the direction of the footpath. As they were walking on, Jack asked his cousin if it was usual for magpies to build in such places as they had found this nest in.

"Oh yes," said Bob, "I have seen many a one in hedgerows where these bushes are allowed to grow high and thick. I think as many as in trees, in parts of the country where such hedges abound. The country folks will even tell you that there are two sorts of magpies, which they distinguish by the names of bush-mag and tree-mag; and they add that there is a true difference between them, independently of the difference of their nesting places. The bush-mag they say has a much shorter tail than the other. But my father laughs at that, and says the difference in the length of the tail in the alleged varieties is much the same as that in the measurements of Peter Simple's royal Bengal tiger, which measured sixteen feet from the nose to the tail, and seventeen from the tail to the nose. I suppose their instinct teaches them that a well-selected thick bush is quite as likely to be a safe place for their nest as a tall tree, and they act accordingly, on what is God's lesson to them. And we have had

a proof to-day that they do not practise what they learn badly."

Thus talking, the boys reached the lane, but instead of leaving it immediately for the footpath, they continued to walk along it until they reached the corner of the wood. Entering here, they found themselves among a good many large beech trees, with very little undergrowth beneath them. Jack's ear caught a bird's note, rather a sweet one, and several times repeated. Bob's attention was arrested by it at the same moment.

"There's a nuthatch," he said; and after a very short pause, he continued, "there must be several of them here. Look—here are traces of last autumn's work," pointing out to Jack sundry husks of beechmast, and empty nutshells, which still remained fast in the seams and rifts of an old oak they were abreast of. Bob further laughingly desired Jack to keep his eyes skinned, and if he saw a hole in a tree with anything like clay about it, to let him know."

"What, anything like that?" said Jack, pointing to a hole in an ash tree, which they were passing in a glade a little distance from the beeches, and which—the hole, that is, and not the tree—appeared to have been reduced in dimensions, by the plentiful use of a kind of clay plaster.

"Why, Jack, you're a regular brick. One has

but to ask you for a thing and he gets it. Why, that's the very thing I meant. I'll lay my best hat to your patent ventilator there"—pointing to Jack's tattered cap—"that there's a nuthatch's nest there, neither past nor future, but present. That clay's quite fresh."

"But how to get at it?" asked Jack. "It's seven or eight feet from the ground, and there is not a twig on the tree to hold by; and it's too big to swarm."

"Well, we must try another plan then. If that hole isn't deep we can reach the eggs, if any. The clay put there is quite enough to stop a hole big enough to get my hand in, and yours easily. Here, I'll stand stiff against the tree. You get up; I'll give you a hand. Thus, put your foot in it;—up. Now, on to my shoulder, and make yourself as light as you can, and be quick. Pull out the clay, and in with your hand."

Every instruction was followed as soon as given, and two nuthatch's eggs—white, with pale red spots—were added to the collection. Jack feared the old bird would desert the nest when she saw the dilapidations he had caused.

"Never fear," said Bob; "she'll repair damages before this time to-morrow; and every day for a week after that, perhaps, if it were required. The

nuthatch is a great favourite of mine, and I could tell you an interesting account of a pair, if we had time. I will as we go home, if you like. Now, we must use our eyes more than our tongues."

Jack asked his companion what, in particular, they were to look for? The reply he obtained was to the effect that he (Bob) knew there were many wood-pigeons, or, more properly speaking, ring-doves—the cushats or queests of the northern districts of England—nesting about in the wood; that their nests were very easily found, for the most part; for that though oftentimes placed in the head of a pollard, or the top of an ivy-covered tree, yet very frequently also they were built in much such places as the jay's nest, which the keeper had shown them ten days or a fortnight since, and constructed after much the same manner; being little more than loose platforms of sticks and roots, through which daylight appeared in many places. It appeared that Bob was quite right in speaking of the ringdoves as numerous, and their nests as probably not scarce in the Spinney, for the next ten or fifteen minutes presented no less than three to the eyes of our two young friends. Two of these were, so to speak, suspended on branches extending horizontally, or nearly so, and did not, in the least degree, suggest the idea of a wish for concealment on the builder's part. The

third was in an ivied tree-top, and was only discovered by the noisy flight from it of the pigeon, and the consequent ascent of Jack to investigate.

"The country boys will tell you," said Bob, "that if you touch, or even breathe upon their eggs, the ring-doves will desert their nest. I only know this about it, that the year before last, to try if it were so, I put the eggs from a ring-dove's nest into my mouth, and in due time they were hatched, notwithstanding; and I dare say are very thriving ring-doves at this day."

Jack was curious to know if no more than two eggs were ever laid by a ring-dove, and why only two were laid by the pigeons, and twelve to twenty by a partridge.

"I never saw nor heard of more than two in a nest; and, very rarely, only one. Why the pigeons should only rear two I cannot tell. I should think it is, because their habits are such, and their wariness so great, comparatively few of them are destroyed. Why, a covey of partridges in September will let you walk right in among 'em, and on to them, all but; and I've often heard of—and seen once or twice—a covey cut up by a shooter, so that not one bird in ten was left at half an hour's end. And then, too, suppose you see some partridges some fine morning feeding on a stubble, and a bit of turnips or potatoes a few yards off.

instead of flying away as soon as they see you, if they move at all, it is to run under the turnip-tops; and once there, wait till you come up with your murdering gun. But catch a ring-dove at any such folly. There is but one time in the year when it will let you come near it if it sees you, and that's when the hen is sitting. You may walk right under her, and stare at her, and she'll hardly stir; and the cock will let you come within 20 or 30 yards, and then only fly 30 or 40 more, and wait till you approach again, perhaps. But at any other time of the year, if you want to get near a ring-dove, what you have got to take care of is, that it neither sees you nor smells you. I never knew one in an open stubble or turnip-field let any one get within three or four times the distance a gun will carry, provided only he is not concealed by any fence or wall. And once off, see if the woodpigeons are likely to pitch again anywhere within sight; and then, too, if you get a shot by coming upon them unawares, they are not very fond of acting so as to let you get a second. Suppose the gentlemen, who will come here to shoot pheasants as soon as the leaves are well off, were to save their shot for ring-doves instead, how many would they get? Why, if there were ten for every single pheasant in the wood when the first shot was fired, there would

not be one left after the tenth; and every shot after that, the day through, would be but a chance one. Then, too, the pigeon is in little danger from the cat, the fox, the foulmart, the stoat, and the like, and even from the hawk, comparatively; while the partridge is all day and all night subject to surprises from all these, except the hawk by night. I have sometimes thought these were reasons why the ring-dove and other pigeons should lay only two eggs, and such birds as the partridge and grouse, from seven or eight up to twenty. At all events, it seems clear, from all I have heard, that the ring-doves do increase wonderfully, wherever new homes for them are created by the growth of young plantations to sufficient age and size to shelter them. I heard my father telling of two cases, one in Berwickshire and another in Norfolk, where thirty or forty years ago one could hardly see half-a-dozen ring-doves a day in certain parts of those counties, and now you may see almost as many hundreds in a single flock there; and all from the extensive plantings of fir-trees which had been made within the last thirty or forty years. But, I say, Jack," Bob suddenly broke out, "we're forgetting business sadly. It's all tongue, I doubt, and no eyes. Besides, we ought to be thinking about the gamekeeper."

Acting on this thought, they moved on steadily

in the direction of that corner of the wood near to which they were to meet Banks. The occasional whirr of a pheasant, or hasty scud of a hare, or more deliberate motion of a rabbit, or possibly the rapid gallop up a tree of a squirrel disturbed by them in their passage through the wood, constituted all, in the shape of adventure, which met them for some time. Once or twice Bob had paused for a moment or two, and seemed to be listening intently, and then went on without comment. Now he stopped again, and presently said,—

"I am sure I hear a tapping. I thought I did before. There's a woodpecker at work not far from here."

It was no woodpecker, however, as they presently saw, on emerging into a part of the wood where there were only a few trees, but abundant undergrowth of hazels and other brushwood; for Bob's eye soon detected a nuthatch, with its slate-blue back and yellowish orange breast, and then its mate, tapping away vigorously every few seconds with their hammer-like action of their whole bodies. There they were, creeping rather than climbing about the trees; now head up, now down, now transversely of the tree-trunk, and all with the same apparent ease and convenience to themselves. Jack was not the least tired of watching them, when, after some five minutes so

spent, Bob reminded him of their "meet" at two o'clock. They began to push through the brushwood again, though, and had nearly reached the angle they were making for, when they heard the sound of a gun, rather more to their left. Making hastily to the boundary fence of the wood, they saw the gamekeeper, at no great distance, reloading his gun; and a few minutes served to bring them up with Robert Banks, who was just picking up a small hawk he had shot, and which he said had baffled him again and again in his attempts to trap it; but which had now fallen a victim to its rashness in coming back to its prey. He had seen it strike a young rabbit, but had driven it away a moment or two afterwards, though not able to get near enough to get a shot at it.

"I thought," he said, "if I left the rabbit alone, and hid myself here, he'd be back in ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, so I waited, and there he is;—a very mischievous fellow among young game, and I'm glad I've got him. I got his mate a week ago, at her nest; but I never could get a crack at him, and he wouldn't look at a bait."

"It's a hobby, isn't it?" asked Bob.

"Yes," replied the keeper; "and I sent James Watt up a day or two ago to get the eggs;—they're down at my lodge, three of them, though rather sat upon, I fear."

He then proceeded to tell them what he had referred to in his note. He had found a woodcock's nest with three eggs, which he believed were deserted; at all events, they were welcome to them. They were close to a drive among a lot of dead leaves, about 200 yards from where they now stood:—"and then," he went on to say, "as I was watching for a jay, the day before yesterday, just at the edge of the wood down yonder, below the warren wall, I saw three wild pigeons light on the warren about thirty yards from the wood boundary. I didn't notice them particularly, but happening to cast my eye that way again after two or three minutes, I could see but one out of the three; and looking at that more noticingly, I saw it was a stock dove, not a wood pigeon. The next minute there were two, and then only one again, and then all three, who soon took wing and flew away; but not far or for long, it appeared, for within a quarter of an hour they came back again, but now there were four of them. Not long after this I got my jay, and the pigeons of course flew away at the report; but five went though only four came. I was now sure of what I only suspected before;—I mean, that these birds either had eggs or young in some of the old rabbit holes; and going out to see, I found two holes with young in, and one with eggs; and

I thought you'd like to see them just as they are."

"Indeed we should," said both boys; and in less than five minutes they had the pleasure of feeling the little birds, still quite featherless, in their nests, and securing the two eggs for their collection.

"Now," said the keeper, "let's go for the woodcock's eggs."

These too were taken, but before the boys proceeded to secure them, Banks recommended them to blow them; for he thought they were rotten, and if so, the agitation consequent on their being carried far might so act upon their contents as to cause them to burst. "I once carried home three or four grouse eggs that I took out of a deserted nest," he added, "and before they had been in the house twelve hours two of them burst, and another within two days."

Acting on his suggestion, they found he was quite right in his surmise. They were quite rotten, and had been so some time.

"Ah!" said he, "I thought the nest looked as if it hadn't had its owner near it lately to take care of it."

He had known of a few other cases of a woodcock laying eggs, but had only known of one instance in which the young were brought off;

though he believed young woodcocks bred in the country were not very rare in some preserves.

Banks next went on to say he had remarked a tree which, he was about sure, contained a woodpecker's nest. He hoped and believed it was the great spotted woodpecker, for he had seen a pair about the wood for some days; and besides, Watt had got them three or four eggs of the green woodpecker from a nest in Turley Wood. "He told me he had to take a chisel and mallet to get at them, and the old bird would hardly leave the nest till he had opened a hole big enough to get his hand and arm in, and then she flew out at another hole. The eggs, he said, lay on nothing but a few chips, and raspings like, of decayed wood; and the makeshift for a nest was the whole length of his arm down the trunk of the tree below the entrance hole. As for our nest," he continued, "I've got my little saw, and we'll soon have a look into it. You can easily tell by the size of the eggs, even if we don't see the bird herself, whether they are the black and white woodpecker's or not."

About twenty minutes of steady walking brought them to the tree he had named; about ten more sufficed to show the delighted boys four shining white eggs, lying on much such another nest as the keeper had just before described the green woodpecker's as being; and to complete it all,

just after the segment the keeper had sawn out of the tree had been replaced, and he had just shouldered his gun previously to moving away, they had the pleasure of seeing the black and white woodpecker fly into an adjoining tree, and then almost to the very entrance to the hollow containing her nest, before she perceived her visitors. Acknowledging them only with a screech, "she cut her lucky rather unceremoniously," as Bob remarked.

The keeper now requested the boys to accompany him to his house, as he had the hobby's eggs, and the green woodpecker's also, there; besides which he had two wild duck's eggs, one teal's, three grouse's, and, if they liked, half a score, or a whole one, of pheasants' eggs, all warranted rotten. Bob and his cousin could hardly believe in the extent of their good fortune and the keeper's kindness, and they trudged on merrily by his side to his house. But we must defer to another chapter the account of what they saw there, and the conversation on their road home, merely adding here, that on finding what Banks had to show them, they were excessively glad that, owing to the lengthening of the days, they had now an additional hour before evening roll-call, it being fixed at six now until the end of the half year.

CHAPTER IX.

Walk the Sixth continued—Pheasant Breeding—The Badger —The White-tailed Eagle—Capture of another Badger.

The first few minutes after their arrival at the keeper's house were taken up in stowing away the magnificent additions he enabled them to make to their egg-treasures. They took three of the pheasant's eggs, which, with those of the grouse, they blew first, an operation which even the sturdy Bob was excessively glad to get completed. These large-sized eggs took up so much room that their egg-box was inadequate to contain all they had to carry home. The keeper helped them out of their difficulty by bringing for their use an empty wadding-box, and two or three cap-boxes, the contents of which had been exploded in his service long since. Bob thought these latter, with the help of a little cotton wool, would be the very thing; and on trial, found that the nuthatch's eggs would travel together with the woodcock's in the snuggest way possible in one of them, while another

would contain the stockdove's eggs. As they were packing these last, Jack inquired if wild pigeons of that species always made their nest in deserted rabbit burrows? Banks replied—

"Certainly not. I have known them build in the thick bushy heads of pollard trees, and sometimes even on the ground under a thick furze bush; and once I saw one in a hollow tree. I think they are on the increase, too. There are certainly more here than there used to be. I believe it is the same in Norfolk; and an old friend of mine, who is now gamekeeper on a nobleman's moors in Yorkshire, told me when I saw him a little while ago, that about eight years ago he shot one, and had to ask the parson—who knew a good deal about birds—what it was; while, last winter, he said he saw them ten or a dozen together. One evening in December he was going home after a day's shooting, and happening to go near a fir plantation, he saw a number of wild pigeons taking up their lodgings for the night in it. He went in to obtain a shot, and the first he fired brought down two stockdoves. And he afterwards had occasion to notice that a party of these birds usually arrived first in the plantation, about roosting time; the ringdoves not arriving till twenty minutes or half an hour later. He found, too, that though these two birds roosted together, and

so indiscriminately that he more than once killed one of each sort at the same shot, yet they certainly had not been feeding together during the day; the crops of the ringdoves were full, even to bursting —one or two did burst with the force of the fall— of holly berries, while those of the stockdove were fairly supplied with the seeds of the wild mustard, two varieties of which grew with sad abundance in the fields of a slovenly-managed farm about two miles off. He noticed this in noticing that both birds were apt to disgorge part of the contents of their crops when not shot quite dead. He connected that—I don't know whether rightly or not —with their accustomed habit of feeding their young; *i.e.*, by disgorging food, already partly digested, from their own crops to the throats of the young birds. I should think, though, there *may* be a connexion between the two habits."

Jack's next question was, how he came to have so many pheasants' eggs.

"My answer to that question," said the gamekeeper, "will be best given out of doors. We have always reared a good many pheasants here under hens, but for that purpose we usually brought in eggs which had been laid in the woods, or hedge-rows, or copses about; as many of these outlying nests are in very insecure places, and there was very small likelihood the broods would

he brought safely off, or, if brought off, reared. Thus we always had some few pheasants' eggs that were addle. But the last year or two I have been trying a new plan."

As he finished speaking, he got through a sort of stile inserted in a narrow opening in a very high and thick hedge. The boys on following him saw divers coops, with hens in them, scattered about in various parts of an enclosure, sheltered on three sides by like fences to the one they had come through, and on the fourth by an overhanging plantation, which clothed a sloping bank. Close on the verge of this plantation was an extensive but very light structure, closely paled in all round to about four or five feet high, but with spars rising every three or four feet, from and above the palings, to a total height of eight or nine feet; and where the palings ceased, there large nets with meshes two inches square commenced, covering the whole in on the sides and over the top very securely. This structure was probably fifty or sixty yards long at least, and, as the boys saw directly, divided into compartments, each of which seemed to be twenty-five or thirty feet square. But before proceeding nearer to these enclosures, the gamekeeper drew their attention to the hens and coops. To their great pleasure they saw numbers of young pheasants in or

about several of these coops, some apparently only a few days old, others already as big as partridges, and beginning to show increasing length in the tail feathers; other hens again were sitting. The natural habits of the young bird were attended to, partly by the thick growth of brushwood and of coarse herbage in and near the foot of the tall hedges, partly by strewing quantities of brushwood in various places not far from the coops; and the young pheasants of larger growth showed their sense of the attention by betaking themselves to the shelter and concealment so afforded, immediately the keeper and the two lads showed themselves near them. Directing their steps now to the large net-inclosed structure, the gamekeeper, on reaching it, took a key from his pocket and gave admission to himself and his companions to the interior. Everything was quite still as they entered; but having closed the door, he gently stirred a heap of loose brushwood which lay in the centre with a stick he had in his hand. First one hen pheasant obeyed the intimation thus given, then a second, then a cock, and then a third hen. As long as the visitors remained quiet, the birds, too, either squatted in a corner or ran along the sides of the enclosure from one corner to another; but, if anybody stirred a step or two, they took wing, sometimes one or two, sometimes all four

together, and, soaring in their usual manner, were arrested by the network above and fell back to the ground, or perhaps clung by their feet for ten or twenty seconds to the meshes. Beyond this enclosure were three similar ones, each tenanted in precisely the same way. The boys were eager to know the meaning of all this, for they could see no nests anywhere, and they could not divine what good could be got by confining the pheasants thus. The keeper explained that the pheasant hens were dealt with on exactly the same principle—as regarded their eggs, that is—as the domestic-poultry hens; that is to say, their eggs were taken as soon as laid.

"If they were in the woods," said Banks, "these pheasant hens, one with another, might lay ten or twelve eggs, half of which, under fortunate circumstances, might become young pheasants. How many eggs do you think they will lay here?"

Neither of the boys ventured a guess.

"Well," said the keeper, "I had twelve hens in here last year, as you see I have now, and I took upwards of 500 eggs out, more than 400 of which were hatched and reared; and this year, I think, if we go on as well as we have begun, we shall have an average of forty-five eggs for each pheasant hen."

The lads observed that two of the cocks had

white rings—though that word was hardly correct as used to describe a band of white feathers, which did not quite encircle the throat—round the neck, a little below the head, while the other two had no such marks.

Banks said, "And if you observe, too, the hens with those cocks, as well as the cocks themselves, are rather smaller than these, and, to my eyes, the plumage of both sexes is rather paler than that of these here. Sir Cuthbert got those birds from Hertfordshire, hearing that this plan answered best with *them;* but I don't see any difference myself."

"You must have a deal of trouble with them," said Bob.

"No, not so very much, except in having hens enough ready to set. Feeding them is simple enough; and we contrive to keep them tolerably safe from vermin on the whole. We get a good lot of ants and ants' eggs for them out of the woods and off the moor. Did you ever see that great hill in the Turley end of Fox-Spinney? It would fill three large waggons, I believe; largish red ants they are, and can't they sting just?"

Neither of the boys had heard of this before, but determined they would see it before long. Smaller ones, the materials of some of which would have filled a wheelbarrow, of others a cart, they had often met with, but none even nearly so

big as the one named by Banks. Leaving what Jack denominated the Pheasant Nursery, they turned their steps in the direction of the Kennels, where, however, Banks said he had something else to show them besides dogs. The kennel was a very complete one, and beautifully kept as well as arranged, and the present occupants were two brace of black setters, and five pointers, together with a couple of retrievers. In the yard of the kennel they were met by old Pepper, who usually accompanied Banks wherever he went; but who, since the arrival of a certain new inmate of one of the brick-walled, brick-paved compartments of the kennel, appeared to be under the impression that it would be a dereliction of duty if he left the precincts. The keeper told them several instances of this dog's sagacity and intelligence, and said that he seemed often to reason quite as readily and cleverly as many a country lad could do. Among other things he mentioned was this; that if Pepper, when out with his master, found a rabbit on its seat, he always waited for him to come up before rushing at it; and, if it so happened that the keeper came up on the same side with himself of the thicket or fence in which the rabbit lay, he always went round to the other side and rushed in from thence, as if with the express purpose of driving it out before the gun; a *ruse*,

he said, which generally succeeded. He had never taught him this as a trick, or in any way. It was evidently the result of the dog's own observation and reasoning, and his judgment founded thereupon. He had seen the same thing only in one other dog, and that was an old and very steady pointer, which had been shot to seven or eight seasons before it took the practice up. Pepper acknowledged his master's approach and his own consequent delight, by constructing three quarters of a circle with (or of) himself; in which strange proceeding his stumpy tail and hinder quarters performed some rather inscrutable but decidedly queer evolutions; and then went with him in the direction of—but rather in advance, as if leading him to—the quarters occupied by the strange arrival.

"Aye, master," his demeanour seemed to intimate, "come on; you'll find that queer customer all right. *I've* seen to that."

On looking into the part of the kennel they were thus conducted to, the lads saw, what there was light enough to make out was a greyish mass, with a white stripe down the middle of it, flanked by a dark one on either side, squeezed up into one of the far corners.

"Why, what is it, Robert?" asked Bob.

"Wait a minute, sir, till I dislodge him from his corner, and you'll soon see."

As he spoke, the keeper gave the creature a poke with his stick, which caused it to leave its position and shuffle off rather quickly into the other corner, where it was both nearer to the boys and under a better light for exhibiting itself.

"Why, it's a badger," cries Bob; "I'm sure it is, though I never saw a real one before—only pictures. Where did you get him?—and how?"

"Why, sir," said Banks, smiling at Bob's eagerness, and Jack's seeming inclination to give the wild beast a "good offing," "I found his hole in Turley Wood, the day before yesterday. It was a moonlight night, as luck would have it, that night; so I took old Pepper here, and Jem Watt's Madge, and Jem himself, and having fixed a good strong bag, with a running slide—there it hangs, sir, behind you—so that he should bolt into it, as well as into his hole, if he came home in a hurry, I got up, three or four feet high, into a bushy tree close by, but so that I could jump down in a moment. I had left Jem with the dogs, with orders to go very quietly till he got down to that part of the wood we call Highfield Thicks, and where I had seen, the same day, that a badger had been working lately, and I thought by that time I should have got my preparations complete. It was light enough to see that it wanted a quarter to nine when I got into the

tree; and I hadn't been there five minutes, before I heard Jem begin to cheer on the dogs. In a minute more I heard Pepper's tongue, and I knew he was on some vermin by the note he gave. Almost in less time than it takes to tell, I heard a rushing through the bushes coming nearer and nearer, with the yelps of both dogs a little way behind. In half a minute more, a badger, followed close by another, cut across the glade in front of where I was perched, and the foremost bolted into the bag and tied himself up in it beautifully in half a second. The other was dumbfoundered for a moment or two at finding the way to her hole stopped so strangely, but started afresh in no time; and the dogs coming up ran her to earth in another hole among some rocks, where we couldn't dig her, about 200 yards distant. I soon swung the one I'd got over my shoulder, and there he is safe. I think he can't get out here; these hard, well-laid white bricks will baffle all his efforts; though I did know one once get out of a paved court-yard. He contrived to get a flag up somehow—it must have been a loose one, I should think—not far from the wall, and he precious soon had a hole burrowed out under it, and walked off. I think we shall get the other to-night. Jem came down this morning to say she was still about, and he thought she rested regularly in the earth she took to that night

Bagging the Badger.—p. 170

we got this one. And if we can get her, we shall take them up to the Park to-morrow, as Sir Cuthbert has, for some time, wanted a pair to send—sure I think it was to Liverpool or Birmingham, or some of these towns, where they have a grand zoological garden, but no badgers in, he said." Banks added further, "This chap isn't at all unwilling to eat, though, I dare say, he would soon pine to death if kept long here, and alone. He's rather like the hedgehog for his appetite. He has eaten three mice, half a rat, and two eggs, since he has been in here."

"What was that about the hedgehog, keeper?" asked Jack.

"Oh! sir, only that they will begin to eat as soon as they feel hungry, if you catch them and put them in confinement. One I kicked against in my rounds one night, I brought home with me instead of killing, as I suppose I ought. The very next night I let him out in the kitchen where I was sitting alone, and gave him a bit of raw mutton. He set to at it in a minute or two, and made a strange piggy champing as he ate. He would eat mice, and small birds, and small eggs; but a hen's egg puzzled him, except it were cracked: then he made short work of it. Beef or mutton, too, he liked, but not the fat; he never touched that. He was very fond of getting under the fire-

place among the ashes, when the fire was gone out. And if I put him on the table, he would run off without hesitation, rolling himself up in an instant as he began to fall, and unrolling as quickly, and scuttling off after he had reached the floor. I kept him several weeks, for I had no heart to kill him, and at last I gave him to a gentleman to turn down in his garden, where I hope he is happy now. Do you know what my Yorkshire friend told me was the name for hedgehog in use in his part? It sounded queer to me—'pricky-backed otchen;' that is, urchin, I suppose."

"Why should you think about killing him, Robert?" asked Bob.

"Why, sir, I'm gamekeeper, you see: and there's no doubt they destroy the eggs of game if they find them; and young rabbits and hares, young partridges and pheasants, also, would be anything but safe with them. I knew of one that killed several young turkeys: and another—it was a young lady's pet, that one—killed, and ate two young ringdoves, nearly fullgrown, which belonged to the same fair owner. The murder was brought quite home to Hedge-piggy, I suppose. He couldn't have pleaded an *alibi*—that was certain—for they were all three shut up in the same room; but I believe, not only was this so, and no possibility for any other creature to get in

when the first dove was killed; but in the case of the second, he was caught "red-hand," as the Scots used to call it, when a man was taken in the very act almost of committing a murder. So you see, sir, it's my business to kill hedgehogs. But I don't like it. They seem so harmless like; —so different from those vicious looking stoats and foumarts, which look regular built for mischief and slaughter."

The boys now began to talk of going to the house for their egg-box, and beginning their journey homewards, but Banks said he had still something else to show them, which he thought they would be sorry to have missed seeing; and taking out his watch, assured them they had an hour and thirty-five minutes good yet. So they accompanied him to a sort of spare room or loft, over what might be called the kitchen of the kennel—for great cookings were necessary in preparing the food of so many valuable dogs—and there they were gratified indeed at seeing a very magnificent living specimen of the White-tailed eagle. He appeared to be tolerably tame, and partly reconciled to confinement. He allowed Banks to approach him, and even to caress him also, which he did not seem altogether to dislike. Banks gave his history as follows :—"I saw that fellow and another, apparently a little less than himself, about the warren and the

Common several times in the early part of the year. The warrener tried to destroy them. But he could not succeed in trapping either of them. He shot at them two or three times, however, and kept such a vigilant look-out for them they seemed to get shy of going there. I had tried my luck, too, but it was no go: they were so very vigilant. At last, as I was coming home over the Common, not far from the Marsh, one afternoon, about five or six weeks ago, I disturbed 'em at a feast on a dead sheep. I saw they weren't satisfied yet, they had got so little of the flesh. I knew, therefore, they would be back as soon as the coast was clear. I knew Watt was within half a mile of me, somewhere, as I had sent him to set two or three traps near Spinney Spill. So I put my fingers in my mouth, and gave him my signal to come to me quick—like this," putting his fingers in his mouth and producing a whistle which went through and through the boys' heads, but which the eagle seemed to take very little notice of.

"He was with me in less than ten minutes, and I told him to get up all the traps he could lay hands on in the course of half an hour. Well, he came back with seven. During his absence I had seen the eagles at a distance, evidently on the look-out to ascertain if they could safely return

and gratify their appetite with the tempting mutton I had dislodged them from. No sooner had I the traps within reach than I began, with Jem's help, to set them under the turf—you know how I showed you one day not long since?" he said to Bob, who nodded assent, and only opened his mouth a moment after to say to Jack, who was evidently most anxious to ask how it was done, "Wait a bit. He'll show you after"—"under the turf in a sort of ring all round the carcase. We did it as neatly and with as little handling of the traps and turf as possible, and rubbing our hands on the sheep now and then to mislead the eagles' quick sense of smell. We were perhaps half an hour about it. All our traps were too small for the job; but I hoped if one did get caught, that before he could succeed in struggling out he might literally 'put his foot in it' a second time; and just so it happened. Jem and I went and laid up—we hid ourselves close I can tell you; a good deal closer than if we had been laying up for men poachers—and we hadn't been safely stowed away ten minutes before we heard a croak, and another, and then a third. Says I to Jem, 'that's a bad job, Jem; there's the ravens coming. I wouldn't like to catch one o' them. What's to be done?' Well, I got up just so as to be able to see a little further about, and sure enough the ravens were

both there, and it was clear, too, they meant to have a bit of mutton for supper. I was just going to get up and frighten them away, when Jem, who had been looking out too, pulled me down, saying low in my ear, 'Lay quiet—it's all right.' And so it was. He had caught sight of the eagles in another direction, and he knew well enough the ravens would see them too in two seconds, and take themselves off pretty quick, to wait till their betters had served themselves. I was hardly down in my lair again, before, with a couple of remonstrance-sounding croaks, Ralph and his wife—who were by this time very near the carrion—soared up into the air again and sailed off. Well, to make a long story short, in I should think five minutes at the outside, both eagles were fast by the leg. Jem and I weren't long, you may guess, in getting up and cutting off as hard as we could to the place. My word, what a shindy there was. Well, the biggest of the two got its other foot fast, and then he we thought was quite safe. Jem couldn't help giving a loud halloo! when he saw this. It drew the lesser bird's notice on us rather sooner than it might have been otherwise, I thought; and making a desperate effort he broke the cord of the trap just as we got within five yards of him, and went off with the steel at his toes. He was

Catching the Eagle.—p. 177

shot though on Kerstham Common, about seven miles off, two days after, with the trap still on, and I have got it still. Well, the other bird made furious play with his wings, but his legs were held rather astraddle by the two traps, and he was almost helpless. So we threw away our sticks,—for we expected a fight, and should have had it too if we had caught both,—and weren't long in securing him. We tied his legs and his beak and his wings with our neckerchiefs and some cord. His legs were torn and bloody but very little hurt, as you can see for yourselves plainly enough. But we hadn't finished trapping yet; for while Jem was quite taken up with tying up his bill—rather critical work too, it was—reaching his hand down to pick up a piece of cord he had laid by his side as he knelt, he put it on the bridge of one of the other traps which hadn't been sprung, and the next thing I saw was that he was caught. Didn't he sing out just? As soon as ever I had got the wings fast tied back to back, I went to let him out;—for he durstn't let go the eagle's head, the bill not being quite secure, to loose himself; and it would not have been easy to do if he had tried. He was caught just over the knuckles and across the ball of his thumb. However he wasn't much the worse—though rather soured when I said we had caught an eagle and

an owl same day—and we completed the bonds of our captive and got him safe home. And there he is. I fancy he'll go with the badgers to yonder place—whatever its name may be—if we are lucky enough to get Mrs. Bawsie to-night."

As he ceased speaking, the gamekeeper produced out of one of his capacious pockets a half-grown rabbit, which he offered to the eagle. It was seized without ceremony, and made eagle food of in an incredibly short time. Greatly interested with what they had to-day seen and heard, our two young friends went without further delay to the keeper's lodge; and, resuming their egg-box and pocketing the two cap-boxes and their contents, wished Banks good-evening with many hearty thanks, and set out on their trudge homewards. As they went along, they were so taken up with talks about the badger and the eagle, and with the expression of their wishes that they could have witnessed the captures of which the keeper had given such exciting accounts, and that they could only go with him to-night to see the other badger caught—if the hunt should turn out a successful one,—and also with many mutual congratulations on the extraordinary accessions made this afternoon to their stock of eggs—many of them such "good" ones too!—that neither of them had so much as a thought for the proposed

history of Bob's favourite nuthatches. After a brisk walk of rather over the hour they reached the school, with fifteen minutes to spare. On entering the playing ground, they were told by two or three of their schoolfellows, and a moment after by an under-master, that Dr. Noble had been inquiring for them a quarter of an hour before, and had left orders that as soon as they came in they were to be sent to his study immediately. Rather wondering, but having no reason to make themselves uneasy at this unexpected summons, they hastened to the study. Their knock was immediately responded to by the Doctor's sharp "Come in."

Opening the door and entering, they were received with a smile, and with a "Well, what luck to-day?" Scarcely stopping to notice their "Very good indeed, sir," he went on to say, that Sir Cuthbert Graham had been with him in the course of the afternoon, and had asked him to give them leave to go up to the Park on Monday afternoon, to spend Tuesday, and return on Wednesday; that he had consented very willingly, as their good conduct merited the indulgence, and he thought that their visit would be agreeable to Sir Cuthbert, who didn't the least, he said, seem only intending to do a civil thing, but rather to expect to receive pleasure as well as give it. The Doctor

went on to say further, that his visitor had asked if Robert Benson and his cousin were anywhere about; and that he (the Doctor) had said, "No—they were, he believed, with Robert Banks, either on the Common or in the wood." "Ah! that puts me in mind," rejoined Sir Cuthbert; "I am going up to Banks myself about eight o'clock. He caught a badger two or three nights since, and thinks, I understand, he may get its mate to-night. I should like to see the capture, and so I mean to be there. Would my young friends like to go, do you think? And would it break school rules very badly if you permitted them to go with me? I will bring them back not later than ten or half-past. They can go with me in the dog-cart." "So," continued Dr. Noble, "I told him I should not throw any objections in your way; and you must get your suppers and be ready for him when he calls at half-past seven. You must tell me of your egg successes to-day, at another time." He dismissed them with these words, and they lost no time in getting to their places in school at the first sound of the bell.

It need hardly be said they were quite ready when Sir Cuthbert drove to the door. They were quickly in their places—Bob beside the Baronet, and Jack behind with the groom—in obedience to the "Quick, up with you—you here, Robert," which

followed hard on their kind friend's hearty "How are you, boys? All right, eh?" and quickly they rattled along the Whaldon road; then they turned up the cross road, and over the bridge spanning the Wassett. Jem Watts, on a stout pony, touched his cap as Sir Cuthbert drove up to the gamekeeper's lodge; and in answer to his master's inquiry, "Banks gone on to the wood, I suppose?" quickly replied, "Yes, sir; he'll be waiting for you at the Turley Wood gate." The old bay was stepping out again the next moment, and, in a few minutes more, on into the Turley road, which began to be hilly and less good than were those nearer to the town. However, it was only about twenty minutes past eight when they came up with Banks, at the point named by Watts.

"Well, Banks, will you get her, do you think?"

"Oh! yes, Sir Cuthbert; I make no doubt of it. She's shifted her feeding ground a little, but we shall be sure to get her. Here's Watt coming up with Pepper and Madge, and I've ordered Stevenson to go down to the Thicks, and, as soon as he hears Watt's whistle, to loose his terriers. Watt is to go down here more towards the Bottom, where she was rooting last night and the night before. And if you please, Sir Cuthbert, we ought to be moving too."

"Very well, then, let us be off. Walk him about, Thomas"—to the groom—"till I come back here."

At the gamekeeper's request, after the first ten minutes of their walk, they proceeded very silently and warily, and in such a direction as to come upon the earth, newly occupied by the badger, from behind. Stationing Sir Cuthbert and the two boys—to whom he had found an opportunity of whispering how he would have liked asking them to come, if he had thought it could be allowed—on a rock above the hole, but so that they could see the badger for a space of fifteen yards before it reached its den, if it came from the side he expected it, he proceeded to adjust the bag and its slide, and to ensconce himself on one side. He had barely time to finish doing so when the hunt was up, and in five minutes more the badger was captured,—the three visitors enjoying a capital sight of her rush, after a momentary pause at the edge of the open, into the earth. Their return was without incident, and effected before the time Sir Cuthbert had named.

CHAPTER X.

Visit to Sir Cuthbert — The Fowl on the Lake — Sollington Heronry and Abbey—The Buck-stone—Fly-rods—Crossbill's Nest—Return to Elmdon.

In due time, on Monday, the groom made his appearance with the dog-cart, and our two young friends were speedily conveyed to Wrilton Park. Sir Cuthbert had just ridden in from a round of visits among his tenantry, when the dog-cart drove up, and Bob and his cousin were at once taken in, through the gardens, to the morning room, where his mother was sitting, actively employed with some elaborate process in knitting. Sir Cuthbert was a bachelor of less than thirty years of age, and, as yet, report—after a few years of hesitation on the subject—had decided not to give him to any of the ladies in the county or out of it, of suitable or unsuitable age, position, and fortune. His mother, a lady of nearly sixty, and his only surviving sister, usually lived with him; but the latter was at present on a visit to a friend in Yorkshire. Lady Graham received the

two lads with a simple kindness which had the effect of setting Edwards at ease in a few minutes. Bob, who was an old acquaintance of her Ladyship, and evidently a great favourite, was presently rattling on with some pet topic, in answer to an inquiry or two from the lady, much as if he had been with his own mother; and Jack, who had hitherto only spoken when he was spoken to, soon caught himself originating some remark, and almost wondering the next moment how he ventured to do it. He had seen at once that Lady Graham was what many people would call a very grand lady. She had been very beautiful, and time had dealt as gently with her as he could. What her figure —she was tall—and her manner had lost in grace was compensated by dignity; and yet Jack's conclusion, in less than the fifteen minutes, during which Sir Cuthbert was occupied with answering an open note given him (soon after his entrance) by his mother was, that she was much the nicest lady he had ever seen, next to his cousin Emily; and he could not make out how it was, but that it was much the same to him as if he had known her ever since he was quite a little fellow. When his note was finished, Sir Cuthbert said he was going down to the lake to feed his waterfowl, and the boys could either go with him, or, if they preferred it, spend the hour before dinner in the

large hall, where was a large collection of well-stuffed birds, together with a nearly complete collection of British birds' eggs.

"Oh, live birds before dead ones, please, Sir Cuthbert," was Bob's instant reply, and Jack, evidently enough, was not a dissentient.

They set out accordingly, and a proper supply of corn and bread was laid in as they passed the gardener's lodge, together with four or five mice, which had paid the penalty of their lives for the attempted plunder of beds of peas, and which, from the nature of the trap they had been caught in, bore the same resemblance to field-mice as they usually appear, that the Norfolk biffins of the confectioner's shop do to the same apple while still ungathered from the tree. Proceeding to a part of the lake where the water gradually shallowed to the edge, and the tiny waves lipped over on to a narrow bed of fine gravel, Sir Cuthbert blew a small whistle of peculiar tone, and the next moment some dozens of waterfowl, of various sorts, came flapping or swimming along at as great a speed as they could severally command, to partake of the feast they had learned to associate with the sound of that whistle. Summer ducks, teal, wild ducks, Canada geese, China geese, Spanish geese, even the lone black goose, and a variety of others were there, who were soon gob-

bling away as fast and eagerly as possible, some in the water, some out on the sloping bank. Three swans swam about statelily in the background, hardly offering to approach the common throng; but, after a few minutes given to feeding and inspecting his feathered pets, Sir Cuthbert moved a few paces lower down the lake, to a point where the water was deeper, and the lads observed, that as he moved, the swans kept moving on as he did, until at last, as he paused on the bank, first one and then the other came close in, and took pieces of bread out of his hand, returning to him again and again, until his stock was exhausted. Bob and his cousin, however, were greatly amused at the bold familiarity, or rather impudence, of some of the smaller, quick-diving varieties of water-fowl. Each swan, on getting a piece of bread, if he found it too big, as was usually the case, to be swallowed at once, put it into the water to work at with his bill; as he did so, one of the small fellows who (when Sir Cuthbert moved onwards) seemed to know very well that the swans' turn was coming, and speedily followed in their wake, would dash in and secure a bit, perhaps diving the instant it did so, especially if the swan perceived and resented the act of depredation. Once, when the largest of the swans—perhaps teased by the toughness of a piece of crust,

which baffled all his shakings and peckings, and, perhaps also rather irritated by the very close attention of one of the small fry, which watched his every motion, ready to dart in on the slightest chance—lost hold of his crust in endeavouring to put his troublesome satellite to flight, another who was close at hand seized the crust (as big as his own head) and made off with it, to be in his turn followed, and teased, and assaulted at every turn by half-a-dozen more as quick and active as himself. If he dived, one or more dived too; the moment he re-appeared above the surface, as many more were ready to pounce upon him, and continue their very pertinacious attentions. Then, perhaps, he would lose the great bit, and himself become one of the pursuers. And this continued, until at last even the tough crust, dived with, dabbled with, haggled at, became little more than soft pulp, and was finally disposed of. The boys were so taken up with the interest of more than one such chase as this, that they had forgotten there was another bird—known personally to one of them, and by description to the other—sure to be waiting at no great distance for his share of the dole and of their attention. They were reminded of it, however, by hearing Sir Cuthbert say, "What, Black Jack, are you there? I thought you wouldn't be far off." And there he was,

taking great care to maintain a respectful distance between himself and his owner, and refusing all inducements to lessen that distance by even one of his own short, paddling footsteps. The flattened mouse, suspended by its tail from Sir Cuthbert's finger and thumb, was eyed with great appetency; but it was evidently, "I *won't* come for it—you must throw it to me." And, when thrown, it was disposed of with marvellous celerity, as were also the remaining ones; which done, Black Jack withdrew to the water, and completed the meal by sundry sips of water. Returning to the house, the lads had little more than time enough to prepare themselves before the dinner-bell sounded, and they found themselves sitting down at table just about the time they would have been answering their names had they been at the School. The evening was most luxuriously spent, with *Audubon's Birds* before them, or in listening to an occasional anecdote or illustration of some of the bird-portraits before them, from Sir Cuthbert, who kindly laid aside his book or his newspaper more than once, to direct their attention to some curious or interesting particular, or to answer some question which was referred to him by one or other of his youthful guests.

Nearly two hours, before breakfast the following morning, were given to an examination of

the cabinet of eggs in the hall, and Jack's delight at seeing a suite of guillemot's eggs, comprising not less than thirty-five or forty specimens, no two of which but were more or less unlike, was very great. One or two eggs Bob pointed out as costing considerable sums, from the difficulty of meeting with them at all; others he said were very precious as having been actually laid in England, though the birds that produced them did not usually, or indeed otherwise than very rarely, nest in this country. After breakfast, Sir Cuthbert mounted the boys on a couple of ponies, which both of them declared were perfect, and rode with them to Sollington Abbey, which lay about eight miles from Wrilton Park, in the opposite direction to Elmdon. Bob had often heard of the abbey, and how beautiful and—for ruins—complete the remains were; but he did not know Sir Cuthbert's object in taking them there, and what a great pleasure he had devised for them. On reaching the lodge at the entrance to the park, Sir Cuthbert addressed a question to the woman who opened the gate, and, on receiving her reply, instead of following the drive to the mansion, now known as The Abbey, struck off to the left, and cantered across the turf in the direction of some buildings, glimpses of which soon began to appear between the tree trunks. Bob, whose acquain-

tance with a pony's back had begun at a very early age, and who was almost as much at home there as on his form at school, enjoyed this scamper immensely. Jack, whose riding was much more of the riding-school description, was not half so happy, or, rather, perhaps, comfortable; particularly when a herd of deer, suddenly disturbed by their rapid approach, galloped away, some of them leaping four or five feet from the ground as they did so: for his pony manifested a considerable inclination to have a gallop, too, and, if need were, a little jumping as well. However, Sir Cuthbert had his eye upon both steed and rider, and pulling up himself, Jack's pony also stopped without much reluctance, and they went more quietly on to the buildings they were approaching. Here a man was waiting to take their horses, and, as they pulled up, a second person came up whom Sir Cuthbert addressed as Mr. Dixon, and who, it soon appeared, was the steward. While he was talking to the baronet, the boys had time to take notice of the place they had reached; they saw that the buildings on either hand formed part of an extensive and very complete modern farmstead, and Jack's wonder was rather raised a few minutes after, on entering one of the principal structures—whence a considerable din had, from the time they came within hearing distance, continued to issue

—at finding out it was caused by a thrashing-machine, which took in sheaf after sheaf, almost as fast as they could be fed in at one end, and turned the dressed corn out at the other into sacks, weighing them as they filled, and ringing a bell to make it known as soon as it had done so; while from two or three other spouts the tailings or refuse corn was thrown out, the produce of one spout being almost utterly refuse, those of the others less and less so. Jack was quite astonished to see the exceeding rapidity with which sack after sack was filled and removed, and could hardly believe that he saw corn thrashed, dressed, and measured, at the rate of nearly forty bushels per hour. However, they did not stay long in the barn, and merely looking into the engine-house as they passed, they went on through a part of the park from which the ruins were visible, down a grassy slope to what looked almost like the curve of a broadish river as they saw it from a little distance. Turning round the corner of a large and thick clump of trees, they saw that on the right the water widened out into, apparently, an extensive lake. A few seconds after, Bob exclaimed—

"There's an old heron!—and another!—and another!"

The next moment he observed three or four

more in motion among the trees on what he had taken at first to be the opposite bank of the stream, but which he now saw was an island. Then he saw two of the birds settle on the very topmost branches of a tree. All at once it occurred to him that these birds might breed here, as he saw so many of them, and he turned to Sir Cuthbert to ask.

"Yes," said he, smiling; "this is Sollington Heronry. I thought you had not heard of it from something you said over Audubon last night, and so I planned this surprise for you. Mr. Dixon, here, has the key of the boats, and we will go over and see if we can be lucky enough to meet with an egg or two. Here is one of the farm lads coming down the hill behind us, who will do the climbing part of the business. Your clothes would benefit but little by the process if you attempted it."

They were soon across, and great was the commotion among the herons at their visit. They made out that there were not less than from forty to fifty nests there, and they had plentiful evidence that there were young birds in some of the nests. The boy went up to three of the nests, and got an egg from each of two among the three, and Jack and Bob would have gladly remained for an hour or two watching the heavy but silent flight

of the herons, their balancing efforts as they tried to perch on impossible tree-tops, and every now and then the arrival of a parent bird with the usual fish diet for its young. However, they had to withdraw at last, and taking leave of Mr. Dixon at the boat-house—who undertook to bring or forward the two eggs safely to Elmdon the next market-day—they went up to the ruins of the abbey. The greater part of the walls of the abbey church were still standing; the tower was nearly perfect. The Lady Chapel wanted its roof; but the tracery of its windows, and all its mouldings and quaint beautiful carvings were little injured. The abbot's house, the cloisters, the refectory, the dormitory, the scriptorium, the hospitium, all were pointed out by Sir Cuthbert, and explanations of the different purposes of different parts of the building, and the different styles of architecture betokening the different times at which the different parts of the edifice were erected, were given very clearly in answer to their repeated inquiries. So taken up were they with all they were seeing and hearing, that they quite forgot such ordinary modern matters as eating and drinking; nor was it till they went in, at the bailiff's house, on their return to the farm, and saw the bread and cheese, and a brown jug of foaming homebrewed set out on the wonderfully scoured table, that it occurred to

them to feel that they were hungry. Another half hour saw them remounted, and on their return to Wrilton, but by a different road from that by which they had come. Turning off into a grassy lane, they cantered along till they came to a sort of three-cornered piece of common, bordered on two sides by wood; skirting this, they proceeded by a bridle-road across four or five fields into another lane. Along this, for about half a mile, and then they began to ascend rapidly. Soon they emerged from the lane upon a common, and altered their direction by going a short distance to the left along the fence of a wood. They then went through a gate into the wood, descending the hill a little by a very fair track. All at once, the boys were surprised to see a huge grey mass opening into view just before them. It was a large mass of rock, rising up from the surface of the soil in an open spot among the thick trees of the wood, and on it they saw a large irregular-shaped superincumbent mass, seemingly four or five feet high. Sir Cuthbert told the boys to get off, and give him their bridles, for a minute or two, while they went and touched this upper stone:—a very little push from Bob's hand set it in motion, and they found to their very great pleasure they were standing before a rocking-stone. Eager inquiries followed as to the origin of these stones.

Sir Cuthbert seemed to think some of them might have been artificially adjusted, but he rather inclined to believe that in many cases nature was the artificer whose handiwork these rocking-stones were. But he seemed to have no doubt that they had some connexion with the worship of the original inhabitants of the land. Jack, whose ready imagination had, after a fashion, peopled for him the conventual ruins they had been wandering among an hour or two before, with their ancient black-robed inhabitants, now found himself fancying white-bearded Druids solemnizing their mysteries on that ancient time-hallowed base, and the savage, half-naked votaries, bending below in abject fear; and as figure after figure rose up in his dream, he continued for some minutes gently moving the stone from time to time, quite forgetful of Sir Cuthbert, his cousin, and his pony. Bob had returned as quickly as he could to relieve Sir Cuthbert from the trouble of holding his pony, and was going to call his cousin—feeling a little ashamed of his inconsiderateness—but Sir Cuthbert would not let him. Jack's reverie, however, did not continue long, and, looking round, he coloured deeply as he saw his kind friend still patiently holding his pony; and jumping down he hastened to him, frankly confessing his forgetfulness, and asking pardon for the trouble he had

thus given. He coloured deeper still as Sir Cuthbert asked him, with a kind smile, if the Druid had a very long white beard, and the worshippers were painted very blue, and at once owned that such visions had passed across his thoughts, but that they were very dim and undefined.

"I know so little, sir," he concluded; "I used to read so carelessly, skipping all the parts of my book that were what I called stupid because they only contained explanations or descriptions. And now I begin to find out what a foolish fellow I was. I've skipped such lots about the religion of the Druids and their observances, and the condition of the British tribes then, that almost all I know about them comes from some pictures I have seen. Oh! how I wish I knew all about them. All would be so real to me then at such a place as that stone."

Sir Cuthbert only told him to try and remember what he felt now every time he began to read a book, and to determine to get all he could from that book. "Hundreds of men," he said, "would give years of their lives to have found out at Jack's age the importance of making as much as possible of all their opportunities of acquiring knowledge, of reading carefully and thoughtfully whatever it might be that they thought it worth

while to read at all. But," he added, "you haven't noticed quite all I brought you here to see."

And riding down to an open place abreast of the rocky platform, he bade them observe the landscape.

"Landscape did you say, sir," broke out Bob; "why, wouldn't it be as well to call it a tree-scape? Why, there's nothing but wood in sight!"

"What a place for the Druids to celebrate their worship in," thought Jack, "if all this was oak forest and nothing else 2000 years ago." Feeling that Sir Cuthbert quite understood him, and was not at all disposed to make fun of him, he ventured the question, while Bob's eye was still roving over the expanse of woodland scenery.

"I think it is very likely," was his friend's answer. "Forests or woods which are known to have produced oak timber centuries since are still producing oak timber without any symptom of failure; and I should imagine that all we see now, and immense tracts besides to the west and north of us, were all one continuous forest at the time Julius Cæsar landed in England, and probably for unknown ages before that."

"Do you think there were red-deer and wild-boars here, sir," chimed in Bob, "in those days, and wolves and bears, and all the rest of it?"

"I make no doubt that in this part of the country there were plenty of red-deer, and probably a fair share of the other interesting animals you have named; a few wild cattle also, and very likely goats and sheep, that weren't exactly domestic."

Bob's sentiments appeared to be that it would be much "brickier" than shooting a couple of small rabbits sitting—as he did with his brother's gun one evening last summer holidays—to bag a brace of wild pigs; that is, if he had somebody else to carry them, and was quite sure the old boar, their papa, wouldn't take it ill of him. He thought he shouldn't like the least to have a shindy with an old fellow of that sort.

Sir Cuthbert laughed, and said he thought Bob was about right. A boar would be an awkward customer for a boy. He had once seen, in Germany, a horse so badly hurt with a rip from a boar's tusk, that it had to be shot out of hand as soon as the tussle was over, the rider having been dismounted, with his thigh laid open, and been in great danger of his life, if another gentleman of the party had not passed his spear through the infuriated brute in the very nick of time.

The party had now begun to ride steadily on in the direction of Wrilton Park. No incident occurred worth special note, except that Jack's

pony capered rather more than its rider approved, when a hare got out of her seat right under its nose, as they rode over a part of the common after leaving the Buck-stone—as the Rocking-stone was called by the country people,—and in due time they reached home. As they rode up to dismount at the entrance to the stable-yard, they saw Banks waiting there, with a long thin parcel in his hand, done up in brown paper.

"Well, Banks, you've got them, I see," was Sir Cuthbert's salutation. "Let's see what they are like."

And taking the parcel, he cut the short ties which confined the paper envelopes in five or six places, and removing the paper, revealed two separate long thin packages, encased in a kind of neutral-tint coloured canvas bags. Undoing a ribbon tie at one end, four joints of a slender tapering fishing-rod were disclosed, each reposing in its own separate compartment in the bag. One was a spare top; the other three, when fitted together, made a very beautiful eleven foot fly-rod. The other case, on being opened, displayed similar contents. Sir Cuthbert took both in succession in his hand, and going through sundry evolutions with them, said he thought they would do well. Banks was now standing with another brown paper parcel in his hand, which being undone, out

came two bright, broad check-reels, each with a tapering line on. These were soon affixed to the rods, and the line drawn through the multitude of small rings, and finally through the eye at the end of the top joint. The two boys were looking on in extreme admiration of such dainty fishing-rods, when Sir Cuthbert turned to them and said, "Now, boys, look here; if you don't catch me a good dish of trout with these rods within a fortnight, you don't deserve to have them. Go down now with Banks to the lake, and get him to show you a little how to use them, while I go and see about my letters." And not waiting for their thanks, which it must be confessed did not come very fluently, in their utter surprise at the—as it seemed in their eyes—magnificent present so unexpectedly made them, he passed on into the house, leaving them to go, as he had suggested, to the water-side with the keeper. There was very little wind, and placing them so as to have the advantage of that little behind them, Banks proceeded to show them how to throw the line. It *would* fall in curls just under the end of the rod at first; but in the course of half-an-hour's practice, Bob contrived to make a tolerably straight mark on the water when the line fell, having enough of it out to measure about one length and a-half of his rod. Jack did not succeed nearly so well;

but Banks knew that, if Bob learned, his cousin would not be long behind, and so gave most of his hints, and instructions, and example to him; and, before they left the lake, Bob could throw twice the length of his rod quite straight once in three times, *with* the wind, and not very badly across it; besides avoiding the fatal crack behind, which, if the tyro had a fly on, always means that said fly is not on any longer. Banks went up with the lads to the house, and it was arranged that he should meet them at a given point on the Whitwater, at one o'clock on Thursday afternoon. When they again met Sir Cuthbert, a little before dinner, their raptures and their thanks came out fluently enough. "Such beautiful rods; and as good as they looked. Banks said a pretty good hand might throw eleven or twelve yards of line with either of them, and he would warrant them to kill a 4lb. trout, if a body knew how: and how Bob had often thought there would be nothing he should like better than to be able to throw a fly well, but how he had never thought he could have a real, good rod of his own till he was a good deal older; and, then, to have such a real, beautiful rod given him so unexpectedly;"—and a good deal more to the same effect. Sir Cuthbert enjoyed their raptures, and told them they knew the conditions. They must catch him a good dish of trout with

those very rods in a fortnight. He would have nothing to say to trout caught with a set-line; he should scorn such, he said:—and then, as to the thanks, at least half belonged to his mother, for she had suggested the gift in lieu of "the Tip" they would otherwise have had. He hoped they approved her suggestion: otherwise he could soon set it right, by giving them each a sovereign and keeping the rods himself. Would they have it so? "Oh! no, they would much rather have the rods than two sovereigns, or three either." And then they both went to Lady Graham, and told her how they held her kindness in suggesting that they would like something they could keep always; —oh! so much better than all the tips in the world.

After dinner was over, Sir Cuthbert asked them if they could spare half an hour from their "Audubon" to come and look over a book or two of his, that he usually kept pretty closely to himself. Leaving their birds instantly, they saw him take up one of two rather homely, stuffy-looking, thick pocket-book affairs, tied up with green ribbon that had lost a good deal of its original colour. Jack wondered what book it could be; but Bob, who had seen such books before, was at no loss, and at once said—"Are you going to show us your flies, Sir Cuthbert?"

The book was presently spread open before their admiring eyes—for the fly-rods had opened up in them a new sense of fitness and beauty—and March browns, and red spinners, and green-tails, and spider flies, and coch-y-bond-dhus, and peacock flies, and red and black ants, and red and black hackles, and smoky hackles, and governors, and coachmen, and hosts of others were displayed in all their very unaccountable enticingness. Sir Cuthbert was, meanwhile, as he turned over the leaves, selecting three or four flies here, and three or four there, till he had quite a heap of little coils at his side. At last, having looked through all the trout flies, and not a few salmon and sea-trout ditto, and answered a great many questions as to the uses of one, the season for another, the reason why some were so very tiny and others six times as big, he turned to his mother and asked if she thought Ferrers would have the books ready. In answer to a double ring of the bell, Lady Graham's maid, Ferrers, appeared with what seemed to be two rather large sized ordinary pocket-books in her hand. One of these was given to each of the boys, who on opening them found the paper had been taken out, and in its place alternate sheets of flannel and parchment inserted; the former neatly stitched round the edges and with a double loop of narrow parchment

affixed across the middle. Sir Cuthbert took the book from Bob's hand, and placed a couple of the flies in so that the points entered the flannel at the top of the page, and the gut they were tied on was then passed in a loop under the strip of parchment. He then returned it to Bob, and pushed over the heap of flies which lay beside him, and told the boys to make a partition, and stow them away in their books; adding, as they hesitated, and seemed unable to comprehend all their good fortune and his kindness, "Mind you both bring me the first 2lb. trout you catch with those flies."

Before going to bed, they were obliged to have another peep at their beautiful rods, and either with the late dinner, or the excitement of the morning excursion, and the wonderful presents at the end of it, Bob dreamed of a trout a yard long, which kept taking his fly and never getting hooked, and woke at last with a desperate attempt to plunge in after it, which ended in finding himself wide awake on the floor. Jack's dreams were compounded of Druids, with blue beards and black gowns, sitting in the refectory gallery at the Abbey, and eventually resolving themselves into a number of herons holding a council round the rocking-stone. However, they were up in good time again, and had an hour's practice with rod

and line at the lake before breakfast; at the end of which Bob found himself really beginning to have a little command over his own line, and able to give a hint or two to Jack. After breakfast, Sir Cuthbert showed them the old arms and armour, which once had hung in the Castle-hall, and explained several matters connected with both to them; after which, having yet an hour to the time fixed for their return to the school, they rambled into the wilderness and over to the Castle. As they returned, Bob observed two birds about one of the fir-trees, which he said he was sure were crossbills, and if so, they must be nesting in the neighbourhood. He went in, without delay, to ask if Sir Cuthbert knew there were crossbills about in the wilderness. Sir Cuthbert, who was in the hall, said, "No, indeed he did not; but was Bob sure they were crossbills?"

Bob's reply was to ask if Sir Cuthbert had time to go and see the birds in question. He put himself under the boy's guidance directly, and the birds were pronounced, after a good view of them had been obtained, to be genuine crossbills. Sir Cuthbert at once adopted his young visitor's theory, that, from the presence of the crossbills at that particular time of the year, they must have a nest at no great distance. He inquired particularly on which tree the birds had

been first observed. Bob had noticed them first from their somewhat parrot-like movements among the branches of the tree, and he pointed out not only the tree but the particular branch on which he had first observed them; being able to identify the latter from a peculiar irregularity in formation, which he had observed while endeavouring to make out the concealment they had suddenly sought when his sudden exclamation of surprise at recognising them had caused them to take alarm. Sir Cuthbert at once began to scan that particular tree with very close attention, but appeared to scrutinize the branches much in the same portions of them as if he had been looking for a bullfinch's or chaffinch's nest. Bob said to him after a minute or two,—

"Sir Cuthbert, I read in one of your books yesterday, that the crossbill's nest was sometimes —generally, I think, it said—in a fork of the tree selected by the bird. Will you please look at that tree"—pointing to a pine of no very great size, which stood a short distance from the extremity of the branch he had just before specially pointed out to Sir Cuthbert; and the leading shoot of which, having been in some way destroyed several years before, had been replaced by three shoots of equal pretensions, now forming a decided "fork" in the tree. "I can't see the fork very distinctly,

but I fancy there is something there that doesn't belong to the tree; though to be sure it may be only a heap of the old needles lodged there."

Sir Cuthbert followed the direction of Bob's finger, and was as much taken with the idea that a nest—very likely *the* nest—was there as Bob was. The latter wished to ascend at once and ascertain. He was overruled, however, by suggestions about the "state of turpentine" in which his clothes would be found on his descent, and by considerations for the integrity of the young pine. But he had the satisfaction which was next greatest to that of going up the tree himself, namely, that of going at the top of his speed to summon the gardener with one of his garden ladders. This was soon brought and set against the pine, and Bob mounted almost as nimbly as a cat in his eagerness, and speedily announced it *was* a nest; and not a nest that he had ever seen before. Loosely made, he said, of dry twigs and little else, but with four eggs in it, larger than the greenfinch's eggs—not very much unlike them in colour and markings. Two of them, at Sir Cuthbert's instance, were removed from the nest and most carefully brought down. Bob took it as a matter of course that they would at once be promoted to a place in Sir Cuthbert's grand collection in the hall cabinet. But Sir

Cuthbert himself thought his own undoubtedly English specimens would do quite as well, although these *had* been found in his own grounds; and succeeded at length in satisfying Bob's punctiliousness by assuring him that, interested as he (Sir Cuthbert) was at the fact that crossbills did nest at Wrilton, still he should not have desired the eggs to be taken if he, Bob, had not been himself an egg-collector. Returning to the house with this great addition to their collection of eggs, our two young friends found they had but just time to get their goods together, inclusive especially of the highly-prized fly-rods, and to take leave of Lady Graham, before the groom and dog-cart were announced as ready to convey them back to Elmdon. Sir Cuthbert, as he shook hands with them, reminded them once more that he should look for a dish of trout before that day fortnight, that had been fairly caught with those very rods used by their own hands. "Mind, no poached trout for me," he concluded, as the dog-cart speeded off.